You Can Hear It In The Silence

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You Can Hear It In The Silence

by abbymyg

Summary

Will Graham is an always-tired single parent that works for the FBI as a teacher and a consultant. What the FBI doesn't know, however, is that Will is a killer himself.

Enter Doctor Hannibal Lecter, a renowned psychiatrist contracted by the FBI to help with the Minnesota Shrike Case, who also happens to be a killer.

What will happen when these two killers meet and recognize the darkness inside each other?

Notes

Hello and welcome to my season 1 rewrite!

I've been working on this fic for a while now and I'm happy to finally be able to post it. It's finished, in the process of editing, and each chapter will be posted, if circumstances allow it, every Saturday until completed.

CW: There's a short mention of pedophilia at the beginning of this chapter, and Will kills the dude, so I wasn't sure how/if to tag it. Please let me know what you think.

I hope you enjoy it!

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

Will sighs as soon as he gets into his car, grateful that he didn't let Beverly convince him to keep drinking. One beer was more than enough. He needs to be in the complete use of his reflexes for what he has to do next.

He pretends to be busy on his phone as he waits for the BAU team to drive away, then sends a quick text to the family group chat to let them know he is out of the bar already and on his way to buy dinner. Once he sees that the message was read, he turns off the phone without waiting for a reply. He knows that his kids will understand the meaning of it after years of using the same code.

He turns on the engine and drives away in Baltimore's direction instead of Wolf Trap's. The prey he's been planning to kill tonight is called Nicholas Long, who lives in an apartment building with his wife, right across from a children's playground. Will heard the parents picking up their young kids at the ballet academy talking about a perverted old man that had been touching and exposing himself in the park to the children recently. The police had done nothing about it, as it tends to happen, so Will decided to take matters into his own hands.

He's been keeping watch near the park while Beth attended her ballet lessons, instead of waiting for her in a cafe and grading papers or preparing classes as usual. It didn't take him too long to spot the man. He appeared to be in his late sixties, and he usually stayed in the playground area during the afternoon. Will only had to remain in the neighborhood until late in the night for a few days to understand the man's routine.

If his theory was correct, the man would come out of the apartment building anytime soon to smoke a cigarette before bed. Will guessed that he lived in an apartment without access to a balcony, or his wife didn't like him smoking inside. He is not a hundred percent sure and doesn't intend to get close enough to him for his empathy to allow him inside his mind. He doesn't want to be anywhere close to that man's thoughts. He'll have to kill him before that happens.

Right on time, the front door opens and the man comes out, searching for the packet of cigarettes and lighter in his pockets. Will looks at him for a couple of seconds as he smokes while looking at the now emptied playground, not even teenagers daring to sneak out to drink in the freezing weather of December. It'll probably begin snowing soon.

Will gets out of the car. He hides his hands from the cold in his coat pockets and walks in Long's direction. As he gets closer, he produces a cigarette packet and grabs one, then pretends to look for a lighter patting at his pockets, and makes a frustrated sound at not finding it.

"Excuse me, do you have fire?" he asks the man.

Long turns to look at him and nods, lighting Will's cigarette without offering him any words. Will takes the chance to strike, knocking the man unconscious in mere seconds with a simple but hard hit to the back of his head. He makes sure not to burn himself with the still-lit cigarettes, turning them off and throwing them in his pockets to discard later. He wraps an arm around the man's back and walks them to his car, safely depositing the body in his backseat. He doesn't bother restraining him, as he will begin his work promptly.

He drives to a nearby park, more secluded and further from the main roads, but still symbolic enough to serve Will's design. He parks the car a few blocks away and takes a deep breath before grabbing Long's unconscious body in his arms, cursing at the weight. He brings it to a bench right in front of the playground, placing the body in a sitting position. After, he unbuckles the man's pants and lowers them just enough to expose his penis to the cold winter air. Will ties the man's hands with zip ties, securing them behind his back, and then does the same to his feet. He next stuffs a cloth rag in the man's mouth, sure that he'll shortly wake up.

Will wraps one of his plastic-gloved hands around the man's genitalia, trying his best to suppress nausea that threatens to climb up his throat, and lowers the sharp knife he has in his other hand to it, castrating the man in one single motion. Long's eyes shoot open and he chokes when he tries to scream. Will lets him struggle, continuing to drag the sharp knife across his skin, not cutting, just teasing, as he effectively blocks Long's attempted punches and kicks.

"This will be over sooner if you just keep quiet," Will whispers, pleased with the fear he finds in the man's eyes. He looks away fast, too disgusted with him to exchange any other words.

Long stays still after that, which makes Will's work easier. He strips the man of his coat and the many layers under it until he reaches his shirt, which he unbuttons to expose his stomach. On it, with impressive steadiness and precision, he carves the word "pedophile" with a scalpel. The muffled screams from the man are music to Will's ears. By the time he gets to his wrist to amputate his hands, the man has already passed out.

When he's done, he cuts the zip ties holding his legs together and takes a couple of steps back to appreciate his work. Satisfied, he checks the surroundings to look for any possible leftover evidence and drives away when he doesn't find any.

"See? It's not that hard," Will says once Beth managed to solve the mathematical problem on her own.

"Thanks for helping me understand it, dad," she says with a smile.

"Not a problem," he says, ruffling her hair.

"Dad!" she complains. "I'll have to style it again," she pouts.

Just as she's getting up from the table to go do that, an older boy comes running to the kitchen, shirt half-buttoned.

"I'm late, I'm late, I'm late!" he chants and grabs one of the sets of keys from the bowl on the counter.

"It's still early for school." Will frowns in confusion as he looks at him.

"We have a team meeting before school since the competitions are soon," he hurriedly says, heading to the door. "Sorry, Will, I have to run if I want to catch the next bus," he says as he exits

the house.

“It’s okay, be safe, let me know when you arrive,” Will shouts to make himself heard as he leaves.

Elijah gives him a thumbs-up without turning to look at him. Will sighs and closes the door.

“I don’t understand how he never wakes up on time,” Beth says. “Five alarms. He has five alarms. How does he manage to turn them all off and keep sleeping!?”

Will chuckles, shaking his head. He is about to reply when his phone rings, Beverly’s name on the screen catching his attention.

“Morning, Bev,” he greets her. “What’s wrong?”

“Hey Will, sorry for calling so early,” she says, sounding tired. “Look, do you remember the case I told you about? The one with the missing girls?” she asks.

“I remember,” Will says.

“There’s been a murder, unrelated to that, that has also been assigned to our department and we don’t have enough human resources to work on that case but after the last disappearance reported this morning, Jack is growing desperate,” she monologues, then sighs. “What I’m trying to say is, is it possible for you to come lend us a hand after your class?”

“Jack told you to call me?” he deduces.

“Yes,” Beverly says. “We have very little evidence, Will, you’re our best shot.”

Will sighs. “Alright,” he says. “I’ll stop by after driving Beth to school.”

“Thank you,” Beverly says. “Say hi to her for me. I have to get back to this crime scene.”

Will arrives at Quantico a bit early so he decides to fulfill his promise to Beverly before going to his classroom.

“I can’t travel to Minnesota, Jack,” Will says for the millionth time in the day, getting exasperated. “I have two kids to take care of, I can’t just leave them alone in the house out of nowhere.”

“It’s only a two-and-a-half-hour flight, Will, I assure you you’ll be back before dinner,” Jack argues.

“That’s five hours alone, how long will the house visit and the investigation take?” Will argues back. “Send someone else and get them to take pictures to show me, Jack, I’m not going,” he says.

“We have no personnel, everyone is busy with the new case,” he says.

“What’s the new case?”

“Don’t worry about it, I need you to focus on this case.”

Will sighs, rubbing his eyes. “Look, I can help you analyze the evidence you already have, but I’m not going to Minnesota.”

“Alright,” Jack accepts his defeat, although Will knows it won’t last long. “Tell me what you see then.” He points at the map and pictures taped to the office wall. “Eight girls from eight different Minnesota campuses abducted in the last eight months,” he says.

“You’re calling them “abductions” because you have no bodies?” Will asks, walking closer to the wall.

“We have nothing. No bodies. No parts of bodies. Nothing that comes out of a body.”

“Then those girls weren’t taken from where you think they were taken.”

“Where were they taken from then?” Jack asks with raised eyebrows.

“I don’t know. Someplace else,” Will says dismissively.

“All abducted on a Friday so they’re not reported missing until Monday. However he’s covering his tracks, he needs the weekend to do it.”

“Who’s the eight?” Will asks.

“Elise Nichols,” Jack replies. “Disappeared Friday. Supposed to house-sit for her parents over the weekend. Feed their cat. Never made it home.”

“If he’s getting a new girl each time, one through seven must be dead,” Will says.

“So we should focus on Nichols,” Jack says.

“They’re all very similar, don’t you think?” He focuses on the pictures, analyzing their features. “Same hair color, same eye color. Roughly the same age, height, weight.”

“So what is it about these girls?” Jack asks.

“It’s not about all of them, it’s about one of them,” Will says with a sigh, straightening his back. “But I can’t explain what exactly it is without more evidence.”

“Then help me find some,” Jack insists.

Will shakes his head, smiling at how easy the man is to predict. “Find someone else, Jack,” he says. “I have to go give a lecture now,” he adds and leaves before Jack can tell him anything else.

He’s been occasionally consulting with the BAU for a couple of years now, mostly unofficially by Beverly or Jimmy asking for advice for a case. He only officially consulted in some difficult cases, which are ironically all murderers committed by himself, so they went unsolved. Still, Jack knows how precious a mind like Will would be to the team, so it doesn’t surprise him how insisting he is on Will ditching his teaching career and joining the BAU. It’s not something Will plans to do anytime soon.

He gets called to Jack’s office two days later after his class with the news that he has pictures and a report from the Nichols’ household, which was now being treated as a crime scene after Elise’s body was found in her room.

“Antler velvet is rich in nutrients, it promotes healing,” he mutters as he examines the forensic analysis. “He was trying to heal her, somehow.”

“Heal her?” Jack asks, surprised.

“He was trying to undo as much as he could, given he already killed her,” Will states. “Whatever he did to the other girls, he couldn’t do it to her.”

“Is this his golden ticket?” Jack asks.

“No, this is an apology.” Will traces his fingers on the picture of Elise’s body resting peacefully on her bed as if she were merely asleep. “He feels bad because he couldn’t honor her.”

“Feeling bad defeats the purpose of being a psychopath, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, it does. I don’t even know if he is a psychopath. He couldn’t show her he loved her so he put her corpse back where he killed it. Whatever crazy that is.” Will explains.

“You think he loves these girls?”

“No, he loves one of them, and the others to some extent by association. He doesn’t want these girls to suffer. He kills them quickly and, to his thinking, with mercy.” Will takes a sip of the cup of his coffee and leans on Jack’s desk. “He has to take the next girl soon. He knows he’s going to get caught, one way or the other.” He returns his gaze to the file and pauses when something gets his attention. “He took the liver out and put it back in again,” he reads, and the realization hits him, making all his facial muscles go slack. “She has liver cancer. He’s eating them.”

“He’s a cannibal?” Jack asks.

Interesting, Will thinks.

There’s a knock on the door. Will takes the opportunity to sit on one of the chairs in front of Jack’s desk and serve himself some more coffee as the other man goes to answer.

“Ah, Doctor Lecter, please, come in,” Jack says.

Will turns to look at the visitor with curiosity and he has to make an effort not to choke on his drink. The man is tall, likely in his late thirties, with ash blond hair and a charismatic smile, undoubtedly handsome. But when his hazel eyes meet Will’s own blue eyes, he has to look away almost instantly, as if something had burned him. There’s a darkness swimming inside the man that Will can’t quite place, but it feels like all the oxygen around him has disappeared. The stranger’s aura is drowning him and pulling him in equal measure with a strength that Will has never in his life felt before. His heart beats quickly in his chest, equal parts scared and excited.

“Will, this is Doctor Hannibal Lecter,” Jack says and brings Will back to Earth. “He is here to help with criminal profiling for our current case,” he adds. “Doctor Lecter, this is Will Graham, professor at our Academy, currently consulting for the case as well.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mister Graham,” Hannibal says, extending a hand in front of him.

Will shakes it without saying a word and avoids his eyes. He doesn’t need to look at him to know Hannibal is staring at him in interest, with the curiosity most psychiatrists tend to do when he is around them.

“Please, Doctor, take a seat,” Jack tells him. “Coffee?”

“Thank you,” Hannibal nods.

Jack serves him a cup.

“Is this meeting going to take long?” Will asks. “I have to be at home in an hour to take Beth to ballet,” he says as he checks his wristwatch.

“It won’t,” Jack says, giving him a look. Will ignores it.

“So, tell me, how many confessions are there?” Hannibal asks.

“Twelve dozen last time I checked. None of them knew the details until this morning, then everyone knew them.” He sighs. “Some genius in Duluth PD took a picture of Elise Nichols’ body with their phone and shared it with a few close friends, then Freddie Lounds uploaded it to Tattlecrime.com.”

“Tasteless,” Will comments.

“Do you have trouble with taste?” Hannibal asks him.

Will takes a sip of his cup. “My thoughts are often not tasty,” he confesses.

“Nor mine,” Hannibal says.

‘I’m sure they’re not’, Will thinks. But why?

“No effective barriers,” Hannibal carries on.

“I make forts,” Will says.

“Associations come quickly.”

“So do forts.” Will looks pointedly at the desk as he speaks.

“Not fond of eye contact, are you?” Hannibal says.

Will has to physically fight not to roll his eyes. He lets out an annoyed sigh as a compromise.

“Eyes are distracting. See too much, don’t see enough.” He turns to look at Hannibal. “And it’s hard to focus when you’re thinking ‘oh, those whites are really white’ or ‘he must have hepatitis’ or ‘is that a burst vein?’ So yes, I try to avoid eyes whenever possible,” he declares, returning his gaze to the desk.

“Will,” Jack warns.

“I imagine what you see and learn touches everything else in your mind,” Hannibal says, not deflected from making observations. “Your values and decency are present yet shocked at your associations, appalled at your dreams. No forts in the bone arena of your skull for things you love.”

Will freezes at the description that fits the image he projects to the world like a glove. A chill runs down his spine. If Hannibal managed to read him so easily he’ll have to work extra hard to keep his real self completely under the surface.

He's only known him for a minute, but he can tell.

Hannibal is dangerous.

"Whose profile are you working on?" Will frowns, then looks at Jack. "Whose profile is he working on?" he demands.

"I'm sorry, Will, observing is what we do. I can't shut mine off any more than you can shut yours off," Hannibal says but doesn't sound one bit apologetic.

"Please, don't psychoanalyze me, you won't like me when I'm psychoanalyzed," he warns and gets up from the chair. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to drive my daughter to her rehearsal."

Will leaves the building as fast as he can and gets into his car.

What the hell was that? How come a stranger managed to read him so easily only after seconds of having met him? And what the fuck was that darkness he felt emanating from him? It makes Will want to take a shower, as if the darkness had stuck to his skin somehow and he has to get rid of it. It's poisonous, toxic, he can tell.

And yet, he hasn't been so intrigued by something since the last Chesapeake Ripper sounder. It's been a whole entire year since then. This could be interesting. Dangerous, yes, but *interesting*.

He starts the engine and is about to leave when his phone rings, letting him know he has a text from Beverly. He touches the notification and reads a "Drinks tonight?" message that was sent to a group chat named "Be gay, solve crime". He sends a thumbs-up emoji in response and blocks the phone. He could use a drink.

"Dad," Beth says when they're on the way to Baltimore for the ballet academy she attends. "Can I stay over at Adela's tonight?" she asks.

"How will you go to school tomorrow?" Will asks. Adela is Beth's best friend from ballet and she lives in Baltimore, which is more than an hour away from Wolf Trap.

"She says her father has a meeting in Virginia in the morning, he can drive me," Beth says.

"And does Adela have permission from her parents to let you stay?" he asks.

"Yes, I'll show you the text on the next red light," Beth says, almost sounding offended. "Come on, dad, please?"

"Okay, but I'll call Mrs. Henderson to talk about this while you're at the rehearsal," Will accepts. He can hardly deny his daughter anything.

"Thanks, dad, you're the best," Beth says with a smile.

Will smiles too. He doesn't think he is the best, but he tries. Since he got pregnant with Beth when he was a teenager, he promised himself he'll give her everything he didn't have when he was a kid, including a caring parent that would love her and accept her no matter what. He's happy to let the little social butterfly hang out with her friends as long as it doesn't interfere with her studies.

Once he drops her off at the academy, he parks and walks to a nearby cafe he frequents to wait for the rehearsal to finish. He orders the same as usual and sits in a secluded corner to have a bit of

peace and hide the possible disturbing images of his laptop screen from curious eyes as he works on the materials for his next lecture.

He also calls Mrs. Henderson, as he promised, to confirm the details of the sleepover. Her husband and she are going to pick Beth and Adela from ballet, and then Mr. Henderson will drive Beth to her school in Wolf Trap before heading to a work meeting. Satisfied with the arrangement, Will hangs up and goes back to his work of preparing the presentation.

Once he's done with that and ready to move on to grading essays, he pauses to take a bite of his cinnamon roll when his eyes meet another familiar pair of eyes across the room as the man enters the cafe. Hannibal Lecter smiles at him. Will guesses that the polite thing would be to smile back, but he's too surprised to remember to do so.

"What a surprise to see you here, Mister Graham," Hannibal says when he approaches his table and, for a short second, Will feels like he's being sarcastic, as if he might have been following him, but he quickly dismisses the paranoid thought.

"I could say the same thing, Doctor Lecter," Will says, adjusting his glasses.

"Please, call me Hannibal." The psychiatrist smiles at him. "May I join you? I see that you're working, I don't want to be a bother," he adds.

"It's no bother, please, sit down," Will says.

Under normal circumstances, he would prefer to continue grading his students' papers in peaceful solitude, but he's so curious and anxious about the older man that he can't oppose the opportunity to find out more about him.

"So, what brings you here?" Will asks.

Hannibal seems pleased at his initiative. "My office is close by," he explains. "I come sometimes to grab something quick to eat before my late afternoon appointments."

A waitress walks by their table and notices them. "Hannibal! Should I get you the usual?" she asks. "To go?"

"One of my patients canceled, so I'll be eating here today," Hannibal answers. "Thank you, Linda."

"Coming right up," she says with a smile before walking away.

Hannibal smiles back at her and then turns to face Will again. "So, tell me, Will, what brings you to Baltimore?"

"My daughter gets her ballet lessons here," he explains. "I usually come to the cafe to grade papers while I wait for her." He takes a sip of his already cold coffee before continuing. "How come I've never seen you here before?"

"I'm afraid I don't usually have time to come on Fridays," Hannibal explains simply. "Today is an exemption, one that I'm grateful for," he adds, smiling in a way that leaves Will wondering if he's being flirted with. "What's your daughter's name?" Hannibal asks.

"Annabeth, or, well, Beth," he says. "She goes by Beth. I don't think anyone has ever called her by her birth name since she was born," he explains. "Except me when I'm angry," he adds with a

laugh.

Hannibal chuckles, then his expression turns serious. “I want to apologize, Will, for my analytical ambush earlier today,” he says. “Although I feel like I will soon be apologizing again,” he adds.

Will shakes his head. “I’m used to psychiatrists trying to poke around my brain,” he says.

Linda approaches their table and deposits Hannibal’s cup of coffee on it, accompanied by some French or Italian pastry that Will doesn’t know the name of. They wait for her to walk away before resuming their conversation.

“You don’t like psychiatrists,” Hannibal says.

“I don’t,” Will admits, seeing no use in denying it.

“Have you ever been to therapy?”

“Not really,” Will replies. “But the mandatory screenings of the FBI were enough.”

Hannibal simply smiles at him and drops the subject. “Is your daughter participating in next weekend’s presentation of the Nutcracker, by chance?” he asks instead. “An acquaintance got me a ticket since her daughter is also performing,” he explains.

“She is, actually,” Will nods, with a beaming smile.

“You sound very proud of her,” Hannibal says.

“I am,” Will says. “When I signed her up for classes when she was little I never thought she would enjoy it so much.”

“How old is she?” Hannibal asks him.

“Twelve,” Will says, “and before you ask, yes, I had her when I was eighteen.”

Hannibal tilts his head in confusion. “I wasn’t going to ask anything of that sort, that would be a very invasive question,” he declares. “Do people ask you stuff like that often?”

“You’d be surprised,” Will says.

“How rude,” Hannibal comments.

Will shrugs. “You get used to it.”

“You shouldn’t have to,” Hannibal tells him sincerely.

“Aren’t we threading too close to psychoanalysis territory, Doctor Lecter?” Will scoffs, uncomfortable.

Hannibal smiles at him and takes a bite of his pastry, not denying it or apologizing. Will can’t read the man, and he doesn’t perceive any of the darkness he saw earlier in the office, making him wonder if he just imagined it. But there’s *something* , even if he doesn’t know what it is, that pulls him to the man like a magnet.

“I heard from Jack you refused to go to Elise Nichol’s crime scene,” Hannibal says.

“It’s in Minnesota, I can’t leave my kids alone on such short notice,” Will repeats the words he told the other man earlier.

“Does your empathy work as well through photographs?” Hannibal asks.

“More or less,” Will says. “There wasn’t much evidence found in this particular crime scene anyway.”

“But you understand his motive.”

“He’s training for or reliving something he did to one of the girls,” Will says, “and he’s eating them, but that doesn’t help us find him. Bev— um, Beverly Katz from the forensic team found a piece of metal, a shred from a pipe threader that might tell us where the killer works,” he explains.

“Only from a piece of metal?” Hannibal asks with surprise.

“Only from a piece of metal,” Will confirms.

“It must be difficult not to leave evidence behind these days,” Hannibal says.

Something in the way he says it sounds off, but Will doesn’t comment on it. “It is,” he opts to say.

After some more conversation about the case, Hannibal finishes his food and checks the time on his phone.

“You’ll have to excuse me, Will, but I must get back to my office, my next patient will be arriving shortly,” he says as he gets up.

“Of course.” Will nods.

“If you ever change your mind about psychiatrists, I’d be glad to welcome you in my office,” he adds as he prepares to leave. “Or maybe you can come to talk some more about the case, I’m sure I can help you see this cannibal’s face,” he adds with a wide smile.

Will gets the feeling that Hannibal just made a joke only he understands, and he frowns as the man walks to the door and exits the cafe. When Will finishes his work later and tries to pay for his food, Linda informs him Hannibal already paid for both of them.

“The Vigilante case went as usual?” Will asks when he meets his friends at their usual table in the bar they frequent.

“Yup,” Beverly confirms.

“No traceable evidence, no anything,” Jimmy says.

Will suppresses a smile. Of course not, he's careful.

"You don't sound too disappointed," Beverly's wife comments.

"The victim was a pedophile, Stella," Brian cuts in. "I find it hard to empathize with him."

"I'm glad Jack didn't ask you to come to that scene," Beverly says then, putting a hand on Will's shoulder. "I wouldn't have liked you to get in that man's head."

"I wouldn't have liked it myself either," Will says, a shiver going down his spine. "I don't quite enjoy working in the missing girls' case already," he confesses.

"Ah, the Minnesota case?" Jimmy asks. "It's a tricky one. I heard Jack called someone to help with the psychological profile."

Will nods after he takes a sip from his beer. "I met him today," he says. "I'm not sure if Jack brought him to profile the killer or me."

Brian frowns. "Why do you say that?"

"Will is technically not allowed to do field work, he didn't pass the tests," Beverly correctly deduces. "Jack wants you to get more tests to see if you're allowed in the field?" she asks, but it sounds more like a statement.

"Exactly," Will says with a sigh. "I already refused to go to Nichol's crime scene, I don't think he'd accept another negative."

Will guesses Jack will be knocking on his door again soon. He'll have to make plans with his neighbors and friends to babysit his kids in advance just in case.

"So, what is the new consultant like?" Brian asks, raising his brows.

"He's called Hannibal Lecter," Will says. "Older than us, definitely has money."

"Uh, I've been meaning to buy a new car, I could use a sugar daddy," Jimmy jokes.

"Don't let your husband hear you say that," Stella laughs.

"Are you getting along?" Beverly asks, aware of Will's usual hatred for mental health professionals.

"I'm not sure," he says with a frown. "He tried to analyze me when we first met, then apologized and tried to do it again but…" He takes another sip.

"But?" Brian asks with interest.

"I don't know." Will shrugs. "There's…something about him."

"Something?" Beverly asks. "Something like what? Is he hot?"

The rest laugh.

“It’s not that,” Will denies. Yes, Hannibal is attractive, but that’s not the point. “I couldn’t read much about him, there’s something mysterious about him…it’s intriguing.”

“Someone even you can’t read?” Jimmy asks.

“Sounds interesting,” Beverly comments. “I hope I can meet him soon.”

“When are you working with him again?” Brian asks.

“I have no idea,” Will replies.

Something tells him that soon.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Hannibal and Will have to work together, so they're forced to get to know each other better. They happen to learn that they share some very particular hobbies...

Chapter Notes

Hello, hope you enjoy this second chapter!

Content Warning for referenced transphobia and homophobia by a character that is killed in the last part of the chapter.

It’s early Monday morning when Will gets Jack’s call. Elijah and Beth have already taken the bus to go to school and, hoping that they haven’t yet entered the establishment where phones are forbidden, he sends them a text to let them know he’ll be in Minnesota for the day but he’ll try to get off work before dinner time. Beth texts back asking who will drive her to ballet, since the day of the show is getting closer and she can’t miss rehearsal. Will assures her that Mrs. Scott—the lovely old lady that lives close to their house—accepted to give her a ride. He also sends Elijah some money in case he has to order dinner if Will doesn’t arrive home on the expected time.

The car Jack sent to pick him up arrives only 20 minutes after the call, which barely gives Will enough time to pack lightly and make sure that the automatic dispensers of dog food are filled and correctly programmed. He is driven to the airport and boards the plane within the hour.

The brief description of the crime scene Jack gave him doesn’t account for how horrifyingly beautiful the display is. Will finds it difficult to swallow as he takes in the beauty of what he is seeing. He would have to be an idiot to think this is the same killer that killed Elise Nichols.

No, this is the complete opposite. The person that killed this girl—Cassie Boyle, an agent informs him—was more interested in the aesthetics of it all than the girl. Almost like the Chesapeake Ripper.

“He took her lungs,” Brian says from where he is examining the body, right on time. “I think she was still alive when he cut them out,” he adds, face contorted in disgust.

“He wanted her to be found this way,” Will says, bringing the attention of the BAU team to him. “ I almost feel like he’s mocking her, or us.”

“Where did all his love go?” Jack asks.

“Whoever tucked Elise Nichols into bed didn’t paint this picture,” Will shakes his head. “Our cannibal loves women. He doesn’t want to destroy them. He wants to consume them. Keep some part of them inside. This girl’s killer thought she was a pig.”

“You think this is a copycat?” Jack frowns.

“I don’t know,” Will says.

Yes, he thinks, and a very interesting one. Hannibal’s face comes to his mind in a flash but is gone in a flash.

“Our cannibal has a place to do the killing, a house or two, or a cabin. Something with an antler room,” Will continues. “He has a daughter. Same age as the other girls. Same hair color, same eye color, same height, same weight. She’s an only child. She’s leaving home. He can’t stand the thought of losing her. She’s his Golden Ticket.”

“What about the copycat?” Jack demands.

Will hides his smirk behind his hand, pretending to rub his nose.

“An intelligent psychopath, particularly a sadist, is hard to catch. There’s no traceable motive. There’ll be no patterns. He may never kill like this again,” he says, beginning to retreat from the scene. He crosses the police tape and turns his back to Jack, hiding his smile once again when he adds, “Have Doctor Lecter work up a psychological profile. You seem to be very impressed with his opinion.”

He walks towards the car that took him to the scene and opens the door to sit on the back seats. His head has been bothering him since the morning, so he takes the bottle of pills he brought from his pocket and downs some aspirin without drinking water.

“I understand you want to return home before the sun goes down, yes?” Jack approaches the car to ask.

Will simply nods, adjusting his glasses over his nose.

“Good, Doctor Lecter will be here soon,” Jack says.

Will frowns. “Doctor Lecter? What for?”

“I want you and him to investigate the lead we have about the shred from the pipe threader,” he explains. “I’ll send you the file with the possible locations.”

Will wants to groan at more work being sent in his direction, but he’s curious about Hannibal. Spending some more time with him won’t hurt.

“Okay,” he accepts.

Jack smiles at him and pats his shoulder before walking away.

Hannibal’s car—a fancy rental, of course—arrives not much later and Will gets inside, assuming that Jack already informed the psychiatrist what he was here to do. He should be scared, honestly, at the prospect of being alone with Hannibal inside a car, that is, if the arrows inside his mind are pointing him in the right direction. He doesn’t fully understand why or how his brain arrived at the

conclusion that the man might be dangerous, his empathy works in strange ways like that sometimes, and he can't fully understand it.

Beth inherited his empathy as well. When he first discovered it, he was horrified, feeling guilty for passing his awful curse on to his little girl. Luckily, Beth's empathy seemed to be more limited than Will's. It takes the form of a weird instinct that can't be explained by reason rather than empathy itself. She knows when someone is lying to her, when someone is feeling sad or angry, when something bad is going to happen... She even woke Will up once in the middle of the night because she somehow knew that something had happened to her best friend, and when Will called, he was informed that her parents and she had been in a car crash. It freaks him out, sometimes, how it borders more on the supernatural compared to his own abilities but, on the other hand, he's glad she doesn't have to go through what Will goes to everyday. He hopes she'll never want to work in the same field as he does.

"Good afternoon, Will," Hannibal greets him.

"Good afternoon, Hannibal," he replies.

"So, what's our adventure going to be today?" he asks, putting on the reverse to leave the scene.

"Jack didn't tell you?" Will asks while he fastens his belt. "You came all this way from Baltimore not knowing why?"

"I was already in Minnesota," Hannibal clarifies. "There was a psychiatry conference on Saturday, and I spent the weekend visiting some colleagues I haven't had the pleasure to see in some time," he explains. "I was meant to take a flight back home this morning when Jack called to tell me there was a new crime scene and he wanted me to work with you, but he didn't explain what we'll be doing."

Will sighs. "Jack wants us to visit construction sites to search for a possible suspect," Will tells him.

"Jack Crawford wants me to make sure you're of sound mind and body... to look for metal pipe threaders?" Hannibal asks amused.

Will smiles, finding humor in it too. "That's between you and Jack."

"Must be hundreds of construction sites all over Minnesota," Hannibal says.

"Certain kinda metal, certain kinda pipe, certain kinda pipe coating. So we're looking at construction sites that use that kinda pipe." Will opens the file that was sent to his phone and groans when he sees the addresses. "All of them are in Minneapolis," he complains.

"Are you not fond of Minneapolis?" Hannibal asks, adjusting the directions in the GPS.

"It's three hours from here," Will says.

"Are you in a hurry?" Hannibal asks in response.

"I don't like leaving my kids alone too much," Will admits.

"It's healthy for both parents and children to spend time away from each other," Hannibal says in what Will suspects is the voice he uses when he speaks to his patients. "Sometimes we tend to see

our children as extensions of ourselves, it's good to remember that they're separate people, independent from us."

"Are you a father?" Will is curious.

"No," Hannibal says, then adds hesitantly, "I took care of my little sister when we were young, but I don't have kids of my own."

"It's not like I never leave my kids alone," Will defends against Hannibal's previous statement. "I just don't like being in another state in case an emergency happens," he says. "They know how to care for themselves, but they're still kids."

"I know about Beth," Hannibal says. "You have other children?" he asks.

"Just one more, Elijah," Will replies. "He's fifteen."

Hannibal hides his surprise at hearing the age better than most people, but Will still catches it. He doesn't need his empathy to know that the man is making the math inside his mind, which tells him that Will had to be fifteen himself when Elijah was born. Will's lips curl up, letting Hannibal process the information in silence before speaking again.

"I adopted him—more like rescued him, honestly, about two years ago," Will declares.

"Rescued him?" Hannibal asks. "From?"

"He still has nightmares from time to time," Will sighs, ignoring his latter question. "It's difficult, sometimes, but he adapted as well as he could to his new home. He is a good brother to Beth."

Hannibal looks like he's about to ask another question but the rumble from Will's stomach distracts him.

"You haven't eaten lunch yet, right?" he inquires instead. When Will shakes his head, he continues, "there's a bag in the backseat with two containers of food, a thermos, and cups," he says. Will turns to look and the bag is indeed there. Hannibal smells the question in the air and adds, "I'm very careful about what I put into my body, which means I end up preparing most meals myself."

"You made two servings," Will comments with a smile as he reaches for the Tupperware containers.

"I did," Hannibal replies with a mirror smile. "I admit I'm a bit hungry myself, I can park somewhere so we can eat."

They end up doing just that. The car comes to a stop on the side of the road, next to a park.

"A little protein scramble to start the day. Some eggs, some sausage," Hannibal says as he opens his container.

Will opens his own. "Smells delicious," he says. He stabs into a piece of meat with the fork provided by Hannibal and brings it to his mouth. He almost moans at the taste. "Tastes delicious too, thank you."

Then he freezes.

The meat tastes familiar. The flavor is disguised with the spices and the eggs, but Will recognizes it still.

No, no, it can't be. He must be imagining things. He hopes his internal conflict doesn't show on his face.

"My pleasure," Hannibal simply says with a smile, so Will thinks he managed to conceal it well.

They eat in peaceful silence for a while until Will decides to test the waters.

"I don't think the Shrike killed that girl in the field," he declares.

"The devil is in the details," Hannibal says calmly. "What didn't your copycat do to the girl in the field? What gave it away?"

Is his interest in Will's analysis because of the investigation or something more? He can't tell. He doesn't know him well enough yet.

"Everything," Will replies. "It's like he had to show me a negative so I could see the positive," he stabs another piece of meat. "That crime scene was practically gift-wrapped."

"The mathematics of human behavior, all those ugly variables. Some bad math with this shrike fellow," Hannibal says. "Are you reconstructing his fantasies? What kind of problems does he have?"

Will huffs a laugh. "He has a few."

"Ever have any problems, Will?" Hannibal asks, almost with a wink.

Will brings a hand to his chest. "No," he says sarcastically.

"Of course, you don't. You and I are just alike: problem-free," Hannibal says, and Will is ready to complain about nearing psychoanalysis territory again, but then Hannibal speaks again. "Nothing about us to feel horrible about," he says.

Will frowns at his food, processing his words. If Hannibal is really who his mind wants him to think he is, the man is doing an awful job of dispelling his doubts. It's so awfully obvious that Will has no other choice but to think that Hannibal wants him to catch on. Why?

"You know, Will," he says, gaining back his attention. "I think Uncle Jack sees you as a fragile little teacup," he states, " the finest china used for only special guests."

It makes Will laugh. He's not wrong. "How do you see me?" he takes the opportunity to ask.

"The mongoose I want under the house when the snakes slither by."

Will is out of words. He might have a headache, but his intelligence isn't affected by it. He can't just be imagining that Hannibal is throwing hints of something at him, right?

"Finish your food," Hannibal tells him, bringing their conversation to an end for the moment.

Hours later, Hannibal throws the car into park when they reach the first location on the list and Will begins to unfasten his belt when he notices Hannibal's expression.

“What are you smiling about?” he asks.

“Peeking behind the curtains,” he confesses. “Curious how the FBI goes about its business when it isn’t kicking in doors.”

“We’re lucky we’re not doing house-to-house interviews,” Will says, opening his door.

“And what are we looking for?” Hannibal asks as they step out of the car.

“At this stage, anything really,” Will says. “But mostly anything peculiar.”

Will and Hannibal go through mountains of files inside the camper trailer office while the secretary that introduced herself as Dixie speaks with someone, most likely her boss, on the phone. Will finds a resignation letter that catches his attention.

“Garret Jacob Hobbs,” he says out loud.

“One of our pipe threaders,” Dixie says. “Those are all the resignation letters. Plumbers union requires them whenever members finish a job,” she explains, then whispers to the phone, “I’ll call you back.”

“Does Mr. Hobbs have a daughter?” Will asks.

“Might have,” Dixie replies.

“Eighteen or nineteen, wind chafed? Plain but pretty?” he asks. “She would have auburn hair. About this tall.” He mimics the height with his hand.

“Maybe, I don’t know.” Dixie shrugs. “I don’t keep company with these people.”

“What is it about Garret Jacob Hobbs you find so peculiar?” Hannibal asks from behind him.

“Left a phone number, no address,” he explains.

“Therefore he has something to hide?” Hannibal asks.

“Everyone else left an address,” Will says, not putting much weight on the matter. “Do you have an address for Mr. Hobbs?” he asks Dixie.

When they have obtained the address and filled the trunk of the rental car full of file boxes, Hannibal takes his place behind the steering wheel to drive them to their new location. Will pops an aspirin when they pull up to the house.

“Is your head bothering you, Will?” Hannibal asks.

“A bit,” Will replies. He catches a smile on Hannibal’s face as they exit the vehicle, but he doesn’t understand the reason behind it. That is until he enters the house.

Will walks purposefully to the front door, trying his best not to look uncomfortable. Hannibal lags behind. Will is halfway to the door when it suddenly opens, revealing a woman bleeding and wheezing being shoved down by a man to the porch before the door slams shut behind her.

Will rushes to the dying woman, the crimson blood pouring out her neck in sharp contrast with her alabaster skin. She grasps haltingly for Will, streaking him with her blood. Her cold hand clutches his wrist as her body spasms. She's not going to breathe for much longer, Will knows. He pries her slick, red fingers from his wrist, trying not to see the last flickers of pain and fear leaving her face.

He gets up from the ground and turns to the door, smashes into it with everything he's got. It's hard to say whether the crack he hears comes from his shoulder or the wood frame. He gives it a well-placed kick, and another, splintering it little by little until he can stumble inside the house. He hears Hannibal's calm steps behind him.

Will holds his gun in front of him, scanning every room for any signs of possible life or danger, adrenaline rushing through his body and making his heart beat wildly in his chest.

"Garret Jacob Hobbs!? FBI" he calls, not receiving an answer.

He walks into the kitchen, and finds the man behind his daughter, holding a knife to her throat. Her eyes are wide in fear as she gasps for air. The knife slices her skin and Will doesn't think twice before shooting, the first bullet striking Mr. Hobbs' shoulder and effectively separating him from the girl. Will fires his gun once more, this time shooting him right in the chest. He's surprised by his own aim, considering he hasn't shot a gun since he left the police force years ago.

Will doesn't even look at Hobbs as he falls to the floor, his full attention directed to the teenager who has also fallen to the ground, blood spraying down her neck in impressive amounts.

"No, no, no," he whispers, placing a hand over her wound in a desperate attempt to stop it. She will be lucky to survive if her father managed to slice through her carotid artery, which is very likely with the amount of blood she's losing.

"Will," comes Hannibal's voice from beside him. He kneels on the floor, carefully avoiding the puddle of blood, looking more worried about getting stains on his clothes than saving the girl's life. "Let me," he says.

Will lets go of her neck and Hannibal wraps his hands around it with more skill. Will takes his phone out of his pocket to call an ambulance and alert the FBI that they found the murderer. He doesn't care about the prints of blood he is leaving all over his phone, and his voice is calm when the call connects. He notices an expression of what seems like badly disguised disappointment on Hannibal's face as if the situation just now had a very different result from what he expected.

When the emergency services reach the scene, Hobbs is still breathing, so both he and Abigail are taken to the hospital. Hannibal rides in the ambulance with them, while Will waits around to explain what happened to both the local police and the FBI.

At some point, Will gets a shock blanket wrapped around him which gives him the idea to play the part, remaining silent and looking at the horizon while an agent speaks to him and another one tosses him a wet towel to clean the drying blood from his arms and face.

Apparently, he plays the part a bit too well and Jack and Alana end up ambushing him after his class to request he get a psychological evaluation if he wants to go back to the field. Will isn't dying to go back to the field, but the therapy session is going to be with Hannibal, so he accepts.

It's Adela's birthday on Wednesday, and since winter break has begun already, she is hosting a slumber party to which, of course, Beth is invited. The parents are invited to have dinner at the home as well, which Will gladly accepts. It'll serve him as an alibi for the activities he has planned for later into the night.

"Are you sure you can't stay for dessert?" Mrs. Henderson asks him.

"I'm afraid I can't," Will replies, making an effort to sound disappointed while he puts his coat on in the foyer of the fancy house the couple owns. "The drive home is long and I have work tomorrow morning."

"Alright," she accepts with a smile. "It was good to see you, Will, drive safe."

"Thank you for having me," Will says, "and Beth."

"You're both always welcomed here," Mr. Henderson says in passing.

Will exits the house after saying his goodbyes and walks to his car. He checks his messages to see if Elijah needs a ride. He's at his girlfriend's house, who also happens to live in Baltimore, and he told Will he'll text him to let him know if he's spending the night there or not. When he opens the messaging app he does in fact have a text from Elijah confirming he'll stay at her house. Will texts him back a quick "be safe" and turns off his phone.

He turns on the engine and drives, parking in a free space two blocks down. He walks the rest of the way. Luckily for him, tonight's prey lives in the same rich neighborhood as the Hendersons do. The man is a transphobic doctor that Will had the displeasure to meet when accompanying Elijah to an appointment with a specialist to evaluate if he's ready for gender-affirming hormone therapy. This doctor heard Will conversing about the subject with Elijah in the waiting room, and Will later overheard him complaining about "youth these days" and "confused kids" to a nurse who looked extremely uncomfortable.

He sneaks into the man's backyard. Elijah assured him that the security cameras will be off when he gets to the place, so he doesn't feel a need to hide from them, only crouching to not be accidentally spotted by the neighbors. The house has motion-activated lights, but the shade from the fence is enough to hide him from the view of any prying eyes.

Once he reaches the backdoor, he picks the lock with expert hands. Of course, the man has an alarm system that Elijah hacked with ease earlier that day, so it doesn't alert the security services or ring. He walks in, aware that the owner won't be home for at least an hour more. He lives alone and has no pets, which makes his nosing around much easier.

Will is not a thief, but he tends to disguise most of his house murderers as robberies gone wrong, especially in rich neighborhoods like this one. He puts on his gloves and empties cabinets and drawers, then throws random papers and files to the floor. He finds a stash of cash in the bedroom closet and grabs it. The animal shelter he frequents could use a donation.

After he's done, he grabs a chair from the dining table and brings it to the foyer, sitting right at the edge of it, just out of sight from the door, to make sure that the doctor walks inside and locks the

door behind him before realizing someone is in his home, but not giving him enough time to do anything about it. He holds his knife tightly and lies in wait.

In the end, time passes and the homeowner doesn't show up. Will frowns, checking his clock for the millionth time to see if he is imagining it, but no, almost an hour from the expected time has passed and there are no signs of him. This happens from time to time, so he isn't too shaken, only disappointed at not being able to fulfill his plans tonight if he takes much longer. He has dogs to feed at home.

He decides to wait a bit longer and is rewarded almost immediately when he hears steps approaching the door. He didn't hear a car. Maybe that's why his prey didn't arrive sooner. If his car broke down or something similar, it would explain his delay.

Will straightens in his chair, anticipation making his chest feel warm. He grips the handle of his knife and positions it in front of him, ready to attack. It takes the doctor a few seconds to unlock the front door and walk in. Will is ready to jump him, and he gets up to do so before instantly freezing when he sees who stands in front of him, looking equally, if not more, surprised.

The transphobic doctor he overheard at the hospital hasn't arrived home yet. Instead, another doctor, one he was supposed to meet for an appointment tomorrow, walked in, wearing a strange plastic suit, holding a duffle bag in one hand and a syringe in the other one.

"Hannibal!?" Will asks, mouth hanging open in surprise.

"Well, this is unexpected," Hannibal says once he recovers from the shock. He closes the door behind him. "I take it you weren't meaning to attack me with that knife?" He points at Will's hand.

"I take it you didn't plan to stab me with that syringe?" Will asks back.

The corners of Hannibal's lips curve up. "No," he admits.

"Good," Will smiles. "So, you're not fond of the homeowner either, huh?" he asks, amused.

Hannibal chuckles. "I didn't come here to have a friendly conversation, no, if that's what you mean," he says. "I'm sure you didn't, either" He sets the bag on the floor and drops the syringe inside.

"Not really." Will declares as he lowers his knife in a sign of reciprocity.

"What did he do?" Hannibal asks.

Will shrugs. "He's a transphobic piece of shit," he spits out. "He upset Elijah with his comments when we went to the clinic," he adds. "What's your reason?"

"We have similar ones, I fear," Hannibal says. "He was my medical examiner when I went to get a blood analysis done a few years ago. I had to fill a form regarding sexuality, and he kept on insisting that I tell him if I have any diseases or infections because he'd find out anyway," he explains.

"So he's homophobic too?" Will can't say he's surprised by the fact. "Wait, years ago?" he asks, tilting his head. "You waited that long to come kill him? Why?"

"I'm a very patient man," he replies simply.

“You do it so it’s more difficult to trace them back to you,” Will states. “You’ve been doing this for a long time, haven’t you?”

Hannibal smiles. “I’d love to answer your questions, Will, but I think we have more urgent matters to discuss,” he says. “What were you planning to do to our good doctor?” he asks.

“Nothing in particular,” Will replies honestly. “Stab him a few times. Bleed him out, maybe.” He doesn’t mention the carving, as it is his personal signature, just to be careful. He didn’t intend to write anything on this man’s body anyway. “What about you?” he asks in return.

“Render him unconscious,” Hannibal replies. Will guesses there’s some type of tranquilizer in his syringe.

“And then?” Will asks when the man doesn’t continue.

Hannibal licks his lips, pondering if he should speak the truth or not.

“Harvest his organs,” he decides to reply.

On its own, it wouldn’t have meant much to Will, but with all his previous suspicions and the hints the man has given him—now he can firmly say they were indeed hints—, his words represent the finding of one of the missing pieces of the puzzle that is Hannibal Lecter.

“I knew what you fed me the other day wasn’t animal meat,” Will says with a click of his tongue, almost sounding victorious.

Hannibal is astounded and Will has to repress the giggle that threatens to escape his throat.

“You’re full of surprises, Will,” Hannibal says once he comes back to himself.

“You don’t know even half of it yet.” Will smiles at him. “I guess we already have something to talk about in therapy tomorrow,” he jokes.

“I look forward to it.” Hannibal smiles back at him. “Can we reach an agreement about our plans for Dr. Caldwell?”

“He’s awfully late, isn’t he?” Will checks the time once more.

“I’m sure he’ll arrive soon,” Hannibal reassures him.

“Okay,” Will sighs. “So, an arrangement, you say? What do you propose?”

“I inject him first,” Hannibal says. “Then you can stab him as you please, as long as you don’t damage any organs I plan to take.”

“What organs are those?” Will asks, curious.

“The heart, I think,” Hannibal says. “Maybe the liver.”

“Sounds adequate,” Will says, “he doesn’t need a heart if he can’t use it.” Hannibal’s eyes shine at him and Will can swear his pupils are slightly dilated. “We have a problem, though,” he says. “I planned to stage this as a robbery gone wrong. I don’t know what the police will think if he’s found here with missing organs.”

“You’re the expert, Will, what would you think?”

“A poorly disguised murder.” Will doesn’t need to give it much thought. He closes his eyes and imagines the scene. “He was killed by someone that didn’t know what he was doing, an amateur. Probably a robber that was curious about killing,” he says when he reopens his eyes.

“So they wouldn’t suspect us,” Hannibal says.

“I don’t know, are you an amateur, Doctor Lecter?” he teases, and doesn’t wait for a negative reply before adding, “Can you remove the organs sloppily?”

“To sell the idea of it being the work of an inexperienced killer?” Hannibal nods. “Yes, I can.”

“Great.” Will smiles, and shakes his head as he laughs.

Hannibal tilts his head to the side in silent question.

“Nothing, I just find it hard to believe that I actually discussed how to murder someone out loud with another person,” he explains.

Hannibal smiles. “Yes, I find it odd as well. I always hunt alone.”

“Maybe that can change after tonight,” Will tries to sound nonchalant as he says it.

He can tell that Hannibal is pleased to hear those words. “Perhaps it can.”

Just as Will is about to joke about having to prove their worth to each other tonight, they hear the sound of a car nearing the house and the lights sneaking through the windows at the side of the door.

“It seems like our prey finally arrived,” Hannibal says.

He retrieves his syringe from where he left it inside his bag, and makes sure that it’s still full and ready. At the same time, Will grasps the handle of his knife with renovated strength. Killing people has become such a routine thing to do for him that his heart doesn’t race when he does it anymore, but this particular situation manages to get his blood pumping quicker than usual. The rush of killing with someone else, someone that Will is pretty sure is the Chesapeake Ripper, is thrilling.

The door opens and Will remains still, letting Hannibal make the first move. Dr. Cladwell walks in and closes the door behind his back, not realizing that there’s someone else in the foyer until he turns around. He lets out a high-pitched scream and backs to the door, fumbling to grab a hold of the knob.

“Good evening, Doctor Cladwell,” are Hannibal’s only words before he covers his mouth with one hand and stabs the syringe into his neck with the other.

The man struggles for mere seconds before his whole body goes slack, unconscious. Hannibal holds him with impressive strength and Will wonders what the hell is wrong with him when he finds it hot, even with the ridiculous plastic suit he’s wearing.

Hannibal lays the man on the floor and he lets a scalpel slide from his sleeve to his hand.

“I usually remove the organs while they're still alive,” Hannibal comments, removing Cladwell from his clothing with practiced speed.

“Like Cassie Boyle,” Will blurts out without thinking.

“Like Cassie Boyle,” Hannibal confirms, without showing any kind of reaction. “Would an inexperienced killer do that?”

“If the case is assigned to the BAU, I can say that it was a robbery gone wrong and the thief decided to try to make money with the victim’s organs now that he was dead,” Will says, “but I don’t know what the local police will think.”

“So we should kill him first, then harvest the heart,” Hannibal nods in understanding. “Would you like to do the honors?”

“Me?” Will asks. “Aren’t you afraid I’ll ruin the organs?”

“I think I’ll only be taking the heart,” Hannibal says. “So as long as you don’t stab him in the middle of the chest, it’ll be perfectly fine.”

Will smiles. He likes to take his time with his prey; he enjoys the way they scream in pain and how their eyes open wide with fear. Thanks to his empathy, he knows exactly how they feel, and can taste their fear and desperation on his tongue. It makes him high.

He hopes whatever sedative Hannibal gives the man isn't enough to prevent him from waking up when Will stabs him.

He tests the theory, slashing at the soft skin of his stomach with his knife. Blood oozes out, the smell of copper filling the air. He's wearing his gloves, but it's not difficult for him to imagine the intoxicating hotness and stickiness of it on his skin. Doctor Caldwell doesn't wake up. Will frowns and stabs bluntly at his thigh this time, before sliding down, making a straight line until his knee with it, deep.

This time, the man squirms, and his eyes start to flutter open. He first blinks a couple of times, the haze of whatever Hannibal gave him making it hard for him to understand what's happening, but Will senses that he's aware of the pain, only unable to react to it in full.

Will moves to his other thigh, copying what he did to his right one, and this time the man struggles —or at least attempts to. He intends to move his hands and reach for the place Will is cutting, but he can barely lift his fingers.

"What did you give him?" Will can't resist asking Hannibal.

"A cocktail of my own making," Hannibal replies. He's been observing Will work with attentive eyes. "A mix of sedatives."

"It works really well," Will praises with honesty.

"I've had a lot of time to experiment," Hannibal says, smiling.

Will is curious to know if he always uses it, but he doesn't want to interrogate Hannibal in the middle of killing someone. Caldwell's consciousness is fading now, both from the blood loss and the sedatives flowing through his veins.

"Your turn," Will tells Hannibal, satisfied, and gets up from the floor.

Hannibal drops to his knees beside the body, not minding the blood with his plastic suit. Will understands at that moment that the reason Hannibal wears it is not to prevent evidence from being left behind, but rather to protect his clothes from getting ruined by the blood and other possible fluids. Will had someone piss on him once. As ridiculous as it looked, a suit like Hannibal's would have prevented him from throwing away a pair of pants.

Hannibal opens his duffel bag and rummages around until he finds a small vial with a label Will can't read from where he's standing. Hannibal grabs a brand new syringe and fills it with the liquid. Once it's full, he gives it a little press to make sure there's no air left inside of it, before searching for the veins on Cladwell's neck and injecting it.

Flumazenil, Will realizes, in a likely high dose if Cladwell opens his eyes almost immediately after it being administered is anything to go by. Hannibal wants him awake for when he removes his heart. An intelligent psychopath, particularly a sadist, Will's words to Jack return to his brain. Hard to catch, he also said. He might have been wrong about that.

There are moans of pain erupting from the back of Cladwell's throat, the wounds on his abdomen and thighs throbbing and aching, but his mind is too foggy to even scream, his limbs refusing to cooperate and help him defend himself against the two killers that face him. His eyes fix on Will and he stares him right back, apathy and anger are all Cladwell can see on him.

"I'm going to remove your heart, Doctor Cladwell," Hannibal informs, making the man's gaze turn to him. "You would normally be sedated for such a procedure, of course," he continues, "but you're not worthy of such a treatment."

"Why?" the man manages to voice.

"Because you don't deserve your heart," Will spits. "You even pushed your wife and kid away because you failed to use it, didn't you?" he asks with a tilt of his head.

Hannibal looks at him with interest before returning to search for something in his bag. Cladwell looks at him too, with renovated fear, probably wondering how Will found out. His empathy helps, of course, but having a teenager in his house with an ample understanding of social media works even better at times. It's amazing the number of information people share on the internet.

"She sided with her, didn't she, when your daughter came out?" he continues, "but you couldn't accept it, so they left." Will catches in the corner of his eye that Hannibal found the sternal saw he was looking for. "You couldn't even bear to soften your heart and try to understand, not even for your own daughter's sake," Will finishes. There are tears streaming down Cladwell's face, satiating Will's thirst for the moment.

"Let's get started, shall we?" Hannibal smiles at the doctor, showing him the sternal saw.

Will watches Hannibal work with interest as he makes a messy incision on the man's chest, the product of Will's insistence on making it look sloppy. He enjoys the way Hannibal focuses on opening the chest and splitting the breastbone. Will doesn't have to check Cladwell's pulse to know it's rapidly decreasing. Hannibal employs a spreader to widen the cut and gain access to the heart. It's pumping blood slower and slower with each passing second. Hannibal removes the organ with not much struggle, and Will wonders if it's just his imagination or if the heart actually beats for a few seconds on Hannibal's hand before coming to a stop.

Almost hypnotized by it, Will observes with surprising arousal as Hannibal extracts a medical cooler from the duffel bag, which seems to have infinite storage space, and properly packs the heart inside. Will wonders what kind of recipe he plans to make.

“Can I invite you over for dinner?” Hannibal suddenly asks as he strips from his plastic suit, now stained with fresh blood.

“I’d love to accept,” Will says, biting his lower lip. “Your cooking tastes amazing,” he adds, hoping the other man catches the meaning behind it, “but I have to go home and feed my dogs,” he explains.

“Another day, then,” Hannibal says, not sounding offended, just a bit disappointed.

“I’d like that.” Will smiles.

“You let me know when you’re free, no rush,” Hannibal says. “You have a busier schedule with the kids, after all.”

Will’s eyes soften at the consideration.

“They spend less and less time at home these days,” he comments.

“The dinner invitation extends to them as well, of course, if they’d like to attend,” Hannibal tells him.

The smile Will gives him is an honest one.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Hi!

Mushroom dude is here, Abigail wakes up, and Beth has her ballet presentation.

Hope you enjoy! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will gets called by Jack to help on the next case after he finishes his lecture, even when he hasn't had his psychological evaluation done yet. Elijah and Beth, who were waiting for him at the cafeteria of the Academy, ride with him in the car to the crime scene and wait inside as he walks to the forest.

Luckily it doesn't take long to investigate the scene, but he's surprised by the sudden hallucination of Hobbs as one of the bodies. He's shaken by it but manages to tell his deductions about the killer to Jack without raising much suspicion. He takes an aspirin and does a breathing exercise before getting back into his car.

He drives his kids to have lunch in their favorite fast-food restaurant, where they talk about a show the whole family is watching together. Elijah thinks that the killer is the stereotypical-looking good girl of the show, while Beth is sure that the main character's boyfriend is hiding something. Will doesn't comment, but he thinks they both might be right. He isn't that interested in the show and has been scolded by both of the kids for not paying attention a couple of times. Still, he's anticipating watching the last two episodes with them tonight over dinner to see if he guessed the ending correctly.

"At what time is your therapy session, Will?" Elijah asks over a mouthful of fries. He never got used to calling him dad like Beth does, and Will is not going to force him.

"Seven thirty," Will replies.

"You seem excited about it," Beth says, resting her chin on her hands on the table. "I thought you didn't like being analyzed."

Will sometimes hates her empathy. Every time she uses it to read him he understands why many people in his life try to keep their distance from him.

"Is he now?" Elijah asks, raising an eyebrow at Will. "Wait, is your therapist hot?" he asks.

Will chokes on his Coke. The kids unhelpfully laugh at him.

"Elijah!" he scolds once he begins breathing normally again.

"What?" the boy is still giggling. "If you react like that, I'm sure they are. What's their name?"

“I’m not telling you,” Will denies. He knows the kid only needs ten seconds and a fast internet connection to find all of the information he needs.

“Doctor Hannibal Lecter,” Beth says. Will is confused about how she knows Hannibal’s name, but Beth explains, “his business card fell from the pocket of your coat the other day.”

Will groans while Elijah types in his phone with expert fastness.

"There's not much information online other than his research papers and such," he comments with a frown, "he doesn't appear to have social media, but," he says pointedly, "there's a picture."

"Let me see, let me see!" Beth requests, reaching to take the phone out of her brother's hands. Elijah hands it to her. "Oh, he is cute," she says, then purses her lips. "There's something…off about him, but I don't know what it is," she adds. “Don’t you think so, dad?”

"Give me the phone," Will says.

Beth passes it to him. The picture shows Hannibal looking at the camera with a smile, dressed in one of his usual three-piece suits, not giving much away. He isn’t surprised that Beth can’t read much of it. Will chuckles when he realizes the source of the photo comes from a page named ratemypsychiatrist.com, much like ratemyprofessor.com, a website that Jimmy had shown him a while back when he found Will in there. He remembers how amused Jimmy was when he read that many reviews mentioned how cute Will’s laptop wallpaper with all of his dogs was.

Curious, Will scrolls down to read the reviews. Hannibal doesn’t have many of them, but the ones he does have all rate him with five stars, with accompanying comments about how much he helped them through the different difficulties of their life.

“There’s something mysterious about him, I agree,” Will says, returning Elijah’s phone.

“And he’s handsome,” Elijah adds, quirking up an eyebrow and smiling.

“Patients can’t date their psychiatrists,” Will says, rolling his eyes.

“So you are interested in him,” Beth follows quickly.

“It would hardly be the most unethical thing you’ve done,” Elijah adds, amused.

“Okay,” Will says, tired, putting an end to the subject by changing it. “I’m going to visit Abigail in the afternoon, do you guys want to come?”

“The victim of the Minnesota Shrike case?” Elijah asks. “She’s still asleep?”

Will nods. Garret Jacob Hobbs died on the way to the hospital, so her statement on her father’s crimes would be crucial for the investigation. The nurses told the FBI she has a great probability of waking up soon. Will would like to be there just in case. He doesn’t want her to get bombarded with questions by Jack as soon as she’s conscious enough to answer them.

“I’ll go,” Beth says. “I’d like to meet her.”

Will turns to Elijah. “I’m hanging out with friends for a while,” he says, shaking his head.

"Alright," Will accepts, "do you need a ride?"

"Nah, I'm walking, Maddie's house is pretty close by."

"Okay, great," Will says. "We should get going then," he tells Beth.

“Okay,” the girl replies.

"See you at dinner,” Will says to Elijah. “Remember to feed the dogs when you get home.”

"Of course," he replies.

Will and Beth arrive at the hospital an hour and a couple of minutes later. They walk into the room where the teenage girl is unconscious, with too many tubes connected to her body. Will sits on the empty chair next to her bed and grabs her hand.

"Hello, Abigail," he mutters.

"Can she hear us?" Beth asks, walking to her dad and sitting on his lap instead of going for the chair on the opposite side of the bed.

Will smiles, putting an arm around her waist to keep her in place. As she grows older, Will appreciates moments like this a lot more. Soon she’ll become a teenager and won’t want to show him any kind of “childish” affection like this.

"I don't know," he replies. "I hope so."

"Hi, Abigail," Beth says then. "My name is Annabeth, but everyone calls me Beth."

Will smiles warmly.

“She’s pretty,” the girl comments. “How old is she?”

“Seventeen,” Will replies, “Almost eighteen.” He reaches for a book in his bag and gives it to Beth. “Do you want to read to her?”

“Yes!” Beth accepts, grabbing the book. “Can I sit on the bed?”

“On the edge,” Will nods.

Beth does so and begins to read.

Will must have fallen asleep at some point after that because he wakes up with a blanket wrapped around him and to the sound of soft whispers. He opens his eyes to see Alana Bloom seated on the chair on the opposite side of the bed, speaking quietly with Beth.

“What are you two talking about?” Will asks.

They both turn to look at him. Alana smiles, happy he’s awake.

“Beth was telling me about her ballet play this Sunday,” she says.

“Are you going to attend?” Will asks, stretching.

“I bought my ticket a few weeks ago,” Alana says. “I know how fast The Nutcracker sells during the festive season.”

“That’s true,” Beth says. “They sold out last year, I wonder if the same will happen this time.”

“Who’s going to see you?” Alana asks the girl.

“Dad and Elijah, of course,” she replies, “Aunts Bev and Stella, Jimmy and his husband, Brian, my friends from school.” She counts them using her fingers.

Talking about the play reminds Will about his appointment with Doctor Lecter, so he anxiously checks the time on his phone to see if he missed it. Luckily, he still has enough time to drive to Hannibal’s office.

The three of them walk out of the room, since Alana also has to leave. They’re in the lobby, ready to get out of the hospital, when Will’s phone rings. The caller ID lets him know Jack Crawford is the one calling.

“Hello?” he answers, repressing a sigh.

He stops in his tracks when Jack informs him that Eldon Stammets, their main suspect in the most recent case, has read an article Freddie Lounds wrote about him and is now under the impression that Will wants to “connect” with Abigail so Will can understand how he feels.

“Beth, stay here!” Will tells his daughter.

“What happened?” Beth and Alana ask at the same time, concerned.

“Alana, sorry, please stay with her for a moment,” Will hurriedly adds, not looking at them as he walks back up the stairs.

He gets to the floor Abigail’s room is in with haste, and runs through the corridor until he gets there, navigating patients and nurses in his mad dash. He reaches into his trousers for his revolver and carefully pushes the door open. When he does, he finds that the room is empty, and the bed is missing. His mind starts racing and he backs into the hallway, grabbing a passing nurse by the arm.

“Where is she?” he demands. “Abigail Hobbs, the girl in this room,” he clarifies quickly. “Where is she?”

“They took her for tests,” she replies, confused.

“Who took her?” he asks, and then repeats after her lack of reply, louder, “Who took her!?”

The nurse stammers but doesn’t answer, and Will can’t waste any more time. He runs to the stairs, bounding down several steps at a time. He gets to a hallway on the basement level, and heads in the direction of the underground parking lot where the sounds of wheels of a gurney are coming from.

Stammets hears his rushed steps and turns around to face him but has no time to react before Will shoots him on the shoulder, effectively propelling him backward and to the floor, against the wall. The man’s gun falls and Will kicks it away with his foot. Then, he pushes Abigail’s gurney to the hallway, trying to keep her as far away from Stammets as possible. Will looks at him, gun aimed right at the man’s head.

“What were you going to do with her?” he asks.

“We evolved from mycelium,” he replies, panting heavily. “I only wanted to reintroduce her to the concept”

“By burying her alive?” Will takes his phone from his pocket.

“The journalist said you understood me,” the man explains.

Will dials Jack with one hand. “I don’t,” he says coldly.

Minutes later, he's back in the hospital's lobby, still talking with agents and hospital personnel, Stammets already arrested and long gone.

When he's done speaking with them, he notices the ticking clock on the wall and realizes it's twenty minutes past the time for his appointment with Hannibal.

"Shit," he curses, grabbing his phone.

He’s glad he decided to save the number in his contacts as soon as he got it because he has no clue where Hannibal’s business card ended up. While he calls, he walks to Beth and Alana.

“Good evening, Will,” Hannibal’s voice greets him after the third tone. “You call about your missed appointment, I presume.”

“Yes, I’m sorry,” Will says, “things got difficult with the current case, um, the suspect tried to harm Abigail Hobbs,” he explains.

“I see,” Hannibal says. “Is she alright?”

“She’s fine, I managed to get him before he could take her away, but…” He doesn’t know how to continue that sentence.

“You’re still worried,” Hannibal finishes it for him. “I’ll be there in fifteen minutes,” he decides and doesn’t allow Will any chance of refuting before hanging up.

“Dad!” Beth calls him when he sees him approach.

“Hey, love, are you okay?” he asks, then turns to Alana. “Thank you for taking care of her.”

“It’s nothing, Will.” She smiles at him. “Is Abigail fine?”

“She’s okay, we caught Stammets,” he replies. He sits down next to them with a sigh.

Beth must sense his discomfort, as she regularly does, because she gets up and walks towards him then grabs his hands.

“Dad, Abigail is safe,” she says, “Elijah is safe— he’s home, I called him,” she continues, “I’m safe.” She squeezes his hands a bit harder. “You caught the bad guy, everything is okay now.”

Will nods, squeezing back. “I know,” he says, “I know.”

Still, he feels odd, like someone is watching him, and all his senses are on high alert, as if something wrong is going to happen any minute now.

“If you have to stay, I can drive her home,” Alana offers. “It’s on the way, anyway.”

“Thank you, Alana,” Will accepts. “Thank you.”

“No problem,” she says. “Is that okay with you, Beth?”

The girl nods. “I’ll text when I get home, dad,” she tells him, giving him a final reassuring smile.

“Thank you, love.” He kisses her hair.

She grabs her bag and accepts Alana’s hand before walking towards the front door. Will is so focused on watching them go away that he jumps when Hannibal, who entered through a side door, touches his shoulder.

“Jesus,” he complains.

“Sorry for startling you, Will,” Hannibal apologizes.

“It’s okay, I’m a bit jumpy,” Will chuckles awkwardly. “Thank you for, um, coming. You didn’t have to.”

"I wanted to," Hannibal says. "I was worried about Abigail, and you," he adds. "You sounded distressed over the phone."

"It feels as if I'm still scared," Will explains, rubbing his face. "I don't know why."

"Perhaps we can find an answer for that," Hannibal says. "Would you like to speak in Abigail's room? The hallway isn’t a very private place."

"Yes," Will agrees. "Some agents were collecting evidence there, I don't know if they're done."

He walks towards the room with Hannibal walking slightly behind him. He pushes the door open, but Hannibal is stopped by the police officer keeping guard by it.

“He’s with me,” Will lets him know, and the man allows them to enter.

The room is empty except for the sleeping teenager on her bed. The forensic team finished their job some time ago, but the FBI asked someone to stay outside and keep an eye on the people that come in and out of the room just to be thorough.

“What happened?” Hannibal asks, sitting next to the bed.

Will paces across the room as he speaks,

“The BAU found seven bodies in a forest, being used as fertilizer for mushrooms, and called me for help” he begins. “Freddie Lounds took pictures of me in the scene and wrote an article that the suspect, Eldon Stammets, read, and he came looking for Abigail under the impression it would help me ‘connect’ with her,” he explains.

“The structure of a fungus mirrors that of the human brain,” Hannibal says. “An intricate web of connections.”

“He admires their ability to connect the way human minds can't,” Will confirms.

“Yours can,” Hannibal says.

Will huffs out a laugh.

“Not physically, or with reciprocity.”

“So he was looking for connection.” Hannibal nods, thoughtful. “How did you stop him?”

“Shot him in the shoulder,” Will replies. “I considered killing him for a moment,” he admits.

“Why didn’t you?” Hannibal asks.

“I would have, but I don’t want to make a habit of killing people while at work, just in case,” Will replies.

“Have to keep the persona up,” Hannibal says.

“Just like you,” Will smiles with complicity. “We did a good job with the doctor, it appears. It wasn’t picked up by the FBI, or the BAU at least.” He changes the subject.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Hannibal smiles back, but doesn’t let Will distract him and goes back to the previous topic. “Where do you think your fear earlier came from? Abigail’s life being in danger?”

Will shakes his head. “Part of it, but not all of it,” he says. “Even Beth sensed I was scared,” he mutters.

“May I tell you what I think?” Hannibal asks politely.

“Yeah, sure,” Will concedes. He stops pacing around and sits on the sofa.

“I think that you might be associating Abigail with your own children,” Hannibal declares. “You empathized with her father to catch him, and you naturally feel a need to protect your kids.”

“With this line of work and…the *hobbies* I have, I always fear something might happen to them,” Will admits, “that they’ll be caught in the crossfire.”

“Do you find yourself feeling the same way towards Abigail?”

“I want to protect her,” he nods, then licks his lips. “Jack thinks she helped her father kill.”

“And what do you think?”

“I don’t know, it’s a possibility.”

Lately he’s been having more trouble than usual thinking clearly. He grabs his bottle of aspirin from his pocket.

“Do you have a headache, Will?” Hannibal asks as the empath swallows a pill.

“I’ve been having a lot of them recently,” he says.

“It might be due to stress,” the psychiatrist suggests.

“I’ve been on the field a few times before, it never affected me like this,” Will says. “I also saw Hobbs in the mushroom garden,” he remembers.

“An association?” Hannibal asks.

“No, an hallucination.”

“Migraines can cause them on rare occasions,” Hannibal says. “More so if combined with stress. The mechanism that distinguishes conscious perceptions from internal perceptions misfired. You displaced the victim of another killer's crime with what could arguably be considered your victim.”

“But why him?” Will asks. “It’s not like my mind doesn’t have a variety of options to choose from. It’s not even my most recent kill.”

“How many people have you killed?” Hannibal inquiries, curious.

“You go first,” Will says.

Hannibal chuckles. “It’s closer to the hundreds than the fifties,” he answers.

“Mine’s the opposite,” Will confesses. “Something around forty and fifty.”

It’s still a lot of people, he knows. He won’t make it to the top ten, but maybe the top twenty of most prolific serial killers. And if what Hannibal is telling him is true, the psychiatrist might make it to the top five. Most serial killers don’t even make it to ten victims before being caught. It’s almost a miracle that two killers of their caliber found each other. Fate, Will almost wants to call it.

“If I ask you something, will you promise not to kill me?” Will asks.

“I don’t have any intentions of killing you, Will, you’re a very interesting creature,” Hannibal says.

Will doesn’t allow the warmth his words make him feel distract him.

“Did you kill Cassie Boyle?”

“Yes,” Hannibal admits easily.

“You’re the one that called the Hobbs’ house that day,” Will says. “Why did you?”

Hannibal looks at the floor, licking his lips as he gathers his thoughts.

“I’m afraid I was curious about how you would react to such a situation,” he confesses. “I saw the possibility of darkness inside of you and I wanted to bring it out. I failed to realize you didn’t need my assistance.”

“That’s why you were so disappointed by my reaction when we were in the kitchen,” Will understands. “You didn’t expect me to be so calm.”

“I had no idea at the moment that you were so acquainted with death,” Hannibal admits. “Nor the taste of human meat,” he adds.

“Ah, that,” Will laughs. “I’ve eaten it a couple of times. I might tell you the whole story someday.”

“I look forward to it,” Hannibal smiles.

“I’m sorry about our appointment,” Will says. “We’ll have to reschedule my psychological evaluation to a close date, Jack will want to know the results soon.”

“I was planning to rubber stamp you,” Hannibal admits.

Will laughs. “And here I was hoping that I’d finally have an excuse not to work in the field anymore.”

"Do you not enjoy fieldwork?" Hannibal asks.

"I enjoy it," Will says, "it's just very time-consuming."

"And you prefer to kill people outside of work." Hannibal winks.

"That too," Will chuckles. "Also most killers are easy to understand, it's not very challenging. I used to simply talk with the team about the cases sometimes and they would go to Jack with answers without me having to travel to crime scenes, but he's getting more demanding these days."

“You should set firm boundaries with him,” Hannibal suggests, “tell him you won’t travel to crime scenes unless they’re in Virginia or Maryland,” he says. “Does your empathy work with pictures?”

“If they’re well taken, pictures and a report of the crime scene are enough,” Will says. “Except in very particular cases.”

“Such as?”

Will grins. “The Chesapeake Ripper,” he declares. “Although I haven’t had the honor to investigate one of his crime scenes in person yet.”

Will is pretty sure Hannibal is the Chesapeake Ripper, but he won’t tell him yet, just in case. He doesn’t want to risk being killed, no matter what the man promises. He sees Hannibal’s eyes darken for a second, a teeny rip of his person suit, but it leaves as quickly as it came.

“I’m curious, Will,” Hannibal says, moving his body forwards in his direction a little bit. “What do you think about the Ripper?"

Fishing for compliments, Doctor Lecter? , he thinks, amused. He suppresses a laugh.

"I think everyone calls him a psychopath because they have no clue what else to call him," Will replies ambiguously. "There's an artistry to what he does that can't be replicated nor understood by anyone other than himself. His motives are untraceable." He pauses, and then, "I wonder if I'll be able to understand him if I see his tableaus in person one day," he baits.

Hannibal hums in contemplation, not speaking for a while. They both stare at Abigail for a moment. The only sound in the room is the beeping of the heart monitor.

“Freddie Lounds would have to watch her back,” Will says, thinking back to the article.

“You should wait a prudent amount of time before entertaining the idea of killing her,” Hannibal advises.

“That’s what you do, Doctor Lecter?” Will asks, raising his eyebrows. “Wait until the victims can’t be traced back to yourself?”

Hannibal smiles but doesn’t answer, at the same time that Will’s phone alerts him of a new message. He clicks on the notification and reads Beth’s text, indicating that she has arrived at their house and is now waiting for Elijah to get out of the shower to discuss what kind of pizza they’re going to order for dinner. He texts a quick reply.

“Sorry, it’s my daughter,” Will apologizes, locking his phone and putting it back in his pocket.

“Do you plan to stay here for the night?” Hannibal asks.

“Yes,” Will admits, a bit embarrassed, “I can’t shake off the fear.”

“Then I’ll like to bring you dinner, if that’s okay with you,” Hannibal offers, getting up from his chair. “I’m afraid it’ll take me too long to cook dinner myself, but I know an exquisite Italian restaurant nearby that offers a takeaway service,” he explains.

“Are you planning to spend the night here too?” Will asks.

“I am,” Hannibal replies. “Would you prefer me not to?”

Will shakes his head. “No, it’s fine,” he says, “Italian sounds great.”

“Any allergies or similar that I should be aware of?” Hannibal asks as he puts on his coat, getting ready to go back to the chilling air of winter.

“I’m not picky.”

“I’ll be back soon.”

Will dozes off (again, strangely), and wakes up to the sound and smell of Hannibal setting dishes on a table, so he has no clue how long it took for the man to come back. He vaguely remembers dreaming of a stag walking down the hospital hallways, advancing in his direction. He straightens on the sofa, realizing that he’s been covered by Hannibal with a blanket.

“Lamb Ragu, with onions, carrots, celery, tomatoes, and hardy herbs, paired with pappardelle,” Hannibal begins presenting the meal to him. “And Veal Marsala, garnished with cherry tomatoes and parsley.”

“Sounds delicious, thank you,” Will says, rubbing his eyes to wake himself up as he approaches the table.

“I took the liberty of bringing you a few items from my house you might need,” Hannibal says. “Toothbrushes, a couple of blankets and pillows—,” he mentions, looking at where his duffel bag rests on the floor next to Abigail’s bed. “—and pajama sets; yours is new, of course."

"You shouldn't have, thank you," Will says, then adds playfully, "you shouldn't spoil me so much so early in our relationship, Doctor Lecter. I’ll get greedy."

Hannibal smiles as he takes a bite of their food.

"I wonder, Will, do you think we'll have an opportunity to encounter each other again on the hunting grounds?" he asks after he swallows.

"I think we'll have plenty of opportunities," Will replies, making the other man smile.

Hannibal seems to be about to say something when a sudden gasp and movement from Abigail's bed startles them both and they turn to look in her direction, shocked to see she has her eyes open.

Abigail Hobbs is awake.

Hannibal and Will stay inside the room with Abigail while the nurses and doctors come to check on her situation. They've both been assigned as her temporary guardians, so their signatures are required to approve the tests she has to take. Will decides not to call Jack for the moment. Not out of consideration, since it's nearing midnight, but because he doesn't want him questioning her, not yet.

Instead, Will gets a call from Beth, so he excuses himself from the room to answer.

"Hello?"

"Hello, dad, sorry to call this late," she says.

"It's fine, why are you still awake?" he asks.

"I was getting ready for bed, got distracted with the dogs," she explains, "but then I remember that I have rehearsal in the morning."

Shit. With everything that happened, Will completely forgot about it. Usually, she didn't have ballet lessons on Saturdays, the only exception being when they had presentations on Sundays.

"Right, okay," Will sighs, thinking. "I'll call Alana to drive you to the hospital first thing in the morning," he decides, "she'll have to come to Baltimore anyway, Abigail woke up," he explains.

"Oh," Beth makes a surprised noise. "That's good, right?"

"Yes, it is," Will nods. "So Alana can drive you here, and then I'll drive you to the Academy."

"Sounds good," Beth says, "what time should I wake up?"

"Seven, six to be safe," Will replies.

"Alright," Beth accepts. "I'll set an alarm."

"Good."

"Goodnight, dad, try to get some sleep," Beth tells him.

Will’s heart fills with fondness. “I’ll try, kid, sweet dreams.”

He hangs up just in time to see Hannibal exiting the room.

“Were you talking with Jack?” he asks.

“No,” Will shakes his head. “I don’t want him to talk to her before we do.”

“Because Jack thinks she was involved in her father’s crimes?”

“If she is, she was most likely manipulated by him, obeyed him out of fear for her own life,” Will explains, “but the FBI and the public won’t care.”

“They’ll see her as guilty regardless,” Hannibal agrees. “Do you think you could sense if she’s guilty or not by speaking with her?”

“Well, I don’t believe she will straight up confess being involved in a crime to an FBI agent, so that’s the only way I have to find out,” Will sighs.

“You’ll have to get her to trust you first,” Hannibal says. “Where do you think this need to protect her comes from, Will?”

“What?” Will was caught off guard.

“I’m merely curious,” Hannibal says. “You mentioned having ‘rescued’ Elijah, you kill people that present a threat or harm to other individuals, and you have dogs, that I wager are rescues as well.”

Will huffs, surprised by how reasonable the psychiatrist’s words sound.

“When you put it like that…” he says. “You make it sound like I have a savior complex.”

Hannibal doesn't deny it. "Perhaps we should analyze it during our next session," he says with a small smile.

"Right, we have to reschedule that," Will remembers.

"You also owe me dinner," Hannibal reminds him. "You promised you'll come over one of these days."

"If you're going to rubber stamp me anyway, maybe we should do a 2x1 and just have dinner at your house, no one will know," Will says, "I promise I won't tell." He exaggeratedly bats his eyelashes, putting a hand over his heart.

Hannibal chuckles. "That's rather unethical, but I'm not opposed to it.”

Will laughs, but immediately after he's hit with a strong sensation of nausea out of nowhere and freezes, gagging on nothing.

"Will?" Hannibal asks, concerned. "Are you okay?" The doctor doesn't wait for him to reply and he presses a palm against the empath's forehead.

"I'm fine," Will is able to talk after a second. "I suddenly felt nauseous."

"You might have a light fever," Hannibal says. "How's your headache?"

"Same as before," Will declares. He's gotten used to the constant pain by now.

"You should take a nap," Hannibal suggests. "You had a stressful day."

"I already took *two* ," Will complains, "I want to talk with Abigail when they're done with the tests."

"She should rest too," Hannibal argues. "I'll wake you up when she feels like talking," he promises.

"Are those the doctor's orders?" Will teases, resigned.

Hannibal chuckles. "Yes, you could call it that."

“Okay then,” he reluctantly accepts, sighing.

Will wakes up to weight on his wrists and hip and struggles out of instinct until he realizes that Hannibal is on top of him. He frowns in confusion, his heart beating faster in his chest. He is not sure if it is from fear or arousal.

“I’m sorry, Will,” Hannibal apologizes as he releases his hold and gets up from the couch. “You were trashing in your sleep, I was scared you’ll hit your head if you fell.”

“At least I’m not the only one that gets nightmares,” a voice comes from the bed’s direction, hoarse and low.

“Abigail,” Will says with a strained voice, then coughs to clear his throat. “Thanks, Hannibal,” he says to the psychiatrist as he gets up.

“Your migraine is very persistent,” Hannibal says, “you may want to visit a neurologist sometime. I can recommend one to you.”

Will hums and then yawns, covering his mouth with his hand. “What time is it?”

“Around five in the morning,” Hannibal says.

Still early to call Alana then.

“Abigail, how are you feeling?” he asks instead, walking towards the chair next to her bed.

“Been better,” she replies with an awkward laugh. “You called my name in your sleep,” she adds.

“I did?” Will says, “I was dreaming about…” he cuts himself, not sure if it’s a good idea to remind her.

“The kitchen,” Abigail finishes the sentence for him. “I dream about it too,” she says, “it was the only thing I could dream about during the coma.”

“I’m sorry,” Will says.

“It’s okay,” Abigail says. “Thank you for saving me.”

“I’m sorry we couldn’t save your mother,” Will adds, “and that I kill your dad,” he says in a quieter tone.

“You were trying to protect me,” Abigail says. “He was loving right up until the moment he was not. He kept telling me he was sorry and to just hold still,” she adds. “He was going to make it all go away.”

“There was plenty wrong with your father, Abigail, but there’s nothing wrong with you,” Hannibal says, sitting on the armrest of Will’s chair.

“You said he was loving, we believe it,” Will says. “That’s what you brought out in him.”

“It’s not all I brought up in him,” Abigail blurts out, sarcastically.

Hannibal and Will exchange a look. Will doesn’t know if it’s a good idea to ask now.

“Did your father ever speak to you,” Hannibal starts, sounding softer and more careful than Will has ever heard him, “about the young women he murdered?”

Abigail goes silent and bites her lip.

“You don’t have to answer that right now if you don’t want to,” Will tells her.

“But we will have to ask those questions eventually,” Hannibal reminds her.

Abigail nods in understanding. “I’m going to be really messed up, aren’t I?” she asks. “I keep going back to that kitchen every time I close my eyes.”

“We’ll help you with the nightmares,” Hannibal says, “and whatever else you might need.”

“There’s no such thing as getting used to what you experienced,” Will says. “It’s everything I see when I close my eyes as well.”

“Do you dream about killing my dad?” she asks. Will nods. “Killing somebody, even if you have to do it, it feels that bad?”

“It’s the ugliest thing in the world.” The lie rolls off Will's tongue as easily as ever, but he feels a pang of guilt he’s not used to feeling when he lies to other people.

Lying to Abigail feels bad. They need her to trust them, but they don’t know if they can trust her yet. Hannibal eyes Will, aware that he isn’t being honest, but doesn’t say anything about it, understanding why he’s doing it.

Abigail takes Will’s words in and waits for a moment before speaking again. “I want to go home,” she requests.

“You’ll have to see other people first,” Will says. “Jack- uh, the head of the Behavioral Analysis Unit of the FBI will want you to see a psychiatrist.”

“Isn’t Doctor Lecter a psychiatrist?” she asks.

“One that wasn’t at the scene when…” Will trails off. “I haven’t called Jack to let him know you’ve woken up yet, but I’ll have to soon.”

Abigail nods. She will probably have to wait until Monday to go back to Minnesota if Alana and Jack agree it's a good idea to do so.

He calls Alana first, who readily accepts to drive Beth, and then calls Jack, who scolds him for not calling him earlier for a while. He promises to visit the hospital and interview her. Will should care more about it, but he has to go, and he trusts that Hannibal and Alana will offer Abigail support against his incessant questions.

Saturday goes by in a blink, and he doesn't even have time to think about Abigail's situation when Sunday comes.

"Dad, I can't find my pointes!" Beth shouts from her room.

"Are you sure they aren't in the wrong drawer?" Elijah asks, walking down the corridor. "Or in your bag already?"

"Did Jack take them again?" Will asks from downstairs, then turns to the dog. "Jack, did you take Beth's shoes?"

"Shit, I seriously can't find them," Beth curses.

"It's okay, love, we'll find them," Will reassures her, going up the stairs.

"Maybe they fell behind the bed, trapped against the wall?" Elijah asks. "I'll help you move it."

"I don't know."

"Okay, okay, don't panic." Will grabs her by the shoulders. "We'll find them. When did you last see them?"

"I don't remember," she says, hiding her face in her palms.

"They're not behind the bed," Elijah announces, pushing it back into place. "Maybe the dogs really took them?"

Beth's phone chimes and she grabs it. She reads the message and sighs in relief.

"Ah, thank God," she says first, then adds, "I'm going to kill her."

"What happened?"

"Crystal accidentally took them with her after rehearsal yesterday, she just noticed," she says.

"Alright, that's settled then," Will says, giving her a brief hug. "Let's do your hair now."

Beth is perfectly capable of doing it by herself now, Will knows, but he has helped with her hair for ballet since she started dancing. He taught himself how to do it with Youtube tutorials, and spent

entire nights at college practicing with Beverly instead of studying. After all that work, he won't stop doing it now.

Once he's done helping her, Beth makes sure that she has everything she needs in her bag, Elijah grabs their tickets and Will gets the keys to the car. They drive to the theater, where Beverly and Stella are already waiting for their arrival.

"How's my favorite ballerina doing?" Stella asks in greeting, hugging Beth. "Ready?" She offers her a hand.

"Hi, aunt Stella," she says with a nervous smile. "Ready."

Stella nods and takes her to the changing rooms backstage, where Will isn't allowed to enter. He, Beverly, and Elijah take their seats on the second row and throw their jackets on the empty seats next to them to save the place for their friends. Jimmy and his husband show up first, as usual. Brian arrives a couple of minutes before the play starts and takes his seat next to Jimmy.

Will wonders if Hannibal is mixed in the public somewhere. The lights have gone dim, so he can't manage to spot him in the crowded theater. Beverly notices him looking and raises an eyebrow at him in questioning, but he just shakes his head and returns his eyes to the front. When the dancers start filling the stage, Will's heart starts beating faster with nervousness as he waits for Beth's appearance. He smiles when he spots her, dancing with a smile on her face and shiny eyes. Will doesn't need a mirror to know he is smiling as well, his heart filling with pride every time he sees her perform.

Once the show is over, Will and the rest of the group wait outside while Stella fetches Beth from backstage. She receives congratulations and hugs from everyone then, and Will thanks everyone for attending and before saying their goodbyes.

"Where do you want to go for dinner?" he asks her as they walk towards the car.

"La barrita," Beth quickly replies.

"Uh, yes," Elijah agrees, "it's been a while since we went there."

"La Barrita it is, then," Will agrees.

"Will," a familiar voice calls him from behind.

He turns around and smiles when he sees Hannibal a few steps in front of him, smiling at him too.

"Good evening," Hannibal says.

"Good evening," Will and the kids echo.

"Beth, Elijah, this is Doctor Lecter," he says to the kids.

"It's a pleasure to meet you both," Hannibal says, offering his hand to shake. Beth giggles when she grabs it. "I heard a lot about you."

"Us too," Elijah says.

Will represses his impulse to elbow him in the ribs, and clears his throat to divert the attention instead. Hannibal simply smiles.

“You’re a very skilled dancer,” Hannibal says to Beth instead, “your performance was outstanding.”

“Thank you,” Beth accepts the praise with a smile.

“She is amazing, isn’t she?” Will smiles, hugging her closer.

“And I hear you’re a talented swimmer,” Hannibal says to Elijah.

“I don’t know about talented, but I guess I’m not bad,” he says, shrugging. “I have a competition next week, actually.”

“Well, I hope you win,” Hannibal says, then looks at Will. “Did you have dinner plans tonight?” he asks.

“Oh.” Will looks at the kids. “We were going to a restaurant Beth likes but…”

“If you’d prefer to eat there, I have no complaints, but my offer of making you dinner still stands,” the man says. “Elijah and Beth are invited as well, of course.”

“I’d like that,” Beth accepts without even consulting her father.

Elijah chuckles and shakes his head as he licks his lips. “Sure, why not,” he says, amused.

Will sighs. He is dying to try Hannibal’s food again, but he knows the reason why his kids have accepted so quickly. Regardless, he was not going to pass on the opportunity.

“Okay then, I guess we are accepting your offer,” Will says.

“Great,” Hannibal smiles.

After a fifteen-minute drive, they arrive at Hannibal’s house.

“Thank you for having us,” Will says as he takes his coat off at the entrance.

“My pleasure,” Hannibal replies.

Will grabs Beth’s coat, who’s too short to reach the wall coat rack, and hangs it next to his and Elijah’s. They then follow Hannibal inside the house and into the kitchen.

“Feel free to wait in the living room or dining room,” Hannibal tells the kids, “the WiFi password is on the yellow note on the side of the fridge,” he adds before turning towards Will. “I could use some help with dinner if you don’t mind.”

"Of course," Will accepts. It's the least he can do. "What are we making?" he asks after he's washed his hands.

"I was thinking of roasted heart, stuffed with kale, bacon, and mushrooms,” Hannibal says.

“Roasted heart?” Will raises an eyebrow.

“Indeed.” Hannibal gives him a conspiratorial smile.

Oh, so it is Cladwell’s heart. Will feels excited shivers travel down his spine.

“What can I help with?” he asks.

“I’ll prepare the meat, you can take care of the duxelle,” Hannibal says. “First boil the kale in salted water and refresh it in cold water,” he instructs.

“On it.”

Will does as he’s told, following Hannibal’s directions every step of the way.

“Do you cook often?” Hannibal asks him while Will slices mushrooms as thinly as he can manage.

“Kind of,” Will says, “but never something this elaborate,” he adds. “Why? Am I that bad?” he teases.

Hannibal chuckles. “Your culinary abilities are perfectly sufficient. I was merely curious.”

“I try to cook dinner for the kids most days, if I’m not working late,” Will says. Lately, he hasn’t been making it home on time at all. “Also for the dogs, canned food is awful for them. But Elijah is a much better cook than I am.”

“Is he now?” Hannibal says. “I’ll have to put him to the test someday,” he adds. “Although, I’m not sure how used he is to dealing with this particular product.” His eyes are fixed on the heart he is skillfully slicing with a knife.

“If you’re wondering whether I feed my kills to my family, the answer is no, not at the moment,” Will replies, catching the hidden meaning behind his words. He’s not going to tell him how he identified the taste back then, not yet. He has to leave some mystery for the second date.

Hannibal doesn’t inquire further and they keep cooking as they chat, the distant sound of the news reporters speaking on the TV reaching their ears from the living room. Once the heart is served after spending forty minutes in the oven, they all meet in the dining room to eat. Hannibal and Beth converse for a while about The Nutcracker while Elijah discusses with Will how predictable the plot of the thriller book his English teacher is having them read is.

After Will takes the last bite of the delicious dish, feeling blissfully full, his phone rings. He sighs when he reads the caller ID.

“Jack?” Hannibal asks with amusement.

“Jack,” Will confirms. “Sorry, I have to pick up.”

“Please,” Hannibal concedes. He would normally consider guests answering their phones at the table rude, but he finds it hard to feel the same way about Will. He’s sure he’ll find himself making more and more exceptions for the FBI agent in the future.

“Hello,” Will says, bringing the phone to his ear.

“We’re taking Abigail Hobbs to Minnesota tomorrow morning,” Jack says. Will can’t say he’s surprised. “I want you to come with us. I’ll send you the details.”

“How long are we staying?” Will asks, headache building. How many times does he have to remind his boss he has two kids in his care he can’t leave alone?

“A day, two at most,” Jack replies.

“Okay,” he accepts with a sigh.

“Good.”

The phone call ends and Will rubs his face with his hand.

“Do you have to travel for work again?” Elijah asks.

“Yes,” Will says. “I’m sorry it’s becoming a recurring thing,” he apologizes.

“Jack wants to take Abigail to Minnesota” Hannibal deduces. Will nods, and just a second later Hannibal’s phone rings as well. “Apparently I’m invited too,” he says.

His conversation with Jack is a bit longer than it was with Will, but he accepts to travel to Minnesota as well.

“It seems like we’re both going, then,” Hannibal says once he’s hung up. “The flight leaves at seven tomorrow.”

“Christ,” Will complains, burying his head in his hands.

“I have a proposition,” Hannibal says. “Why don’t the three of you spend the night here? There’s plenty of room, and it’s closer to the airport. Elijah and Beth can stay in the house tomorrow when we leave, if they’d like,” he offers.

Will considers it for a second. It would save him almost two hours of driving, and he would get more hours of sleep before going, but he hadn’t prepared any clothes. The ones he usually kept in his car in case of an emergency like this were used recently and he forgot to pack another change, not thinking he would find himself in the same situation so soon.

“My girlfriend and I made plans to go to the mall and the movies tomorrow,” Elijah says, misinterpreting his father’s silence for doubt. “We can bring Beth too, I’m sure Isa won’t mind.” The girl gets along really well with Beth. “And maybe Aunts Beverly and Stella can give us a ride home afterwards.”

It sounds like a good plan. Will will have to text his neighbors to feed the dogs and let them out for a bit in the morning, but they are always happy to help.

“Thank you for the offer, Hannibal,” Will accepts in the end.

“My pleasure,” the man says, getting up from his chair. “I’m afraid I don’t have dessert prepared, but I can offer coffee,” he says.

“I’m full,” Elijah replies with a hand over his stomach. “The food was delicious.”

Will thinks there’s something poetic about Elijah eating the heart of a man that made such hurtful comments about him. It makes him smile.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it,” Hannibal says. He’s smiling too, and Will wonders if he’s thinking the same thing.

“I’m fine, thanks,” Beth says.

“Will?” Hannibal asks. “I can offer you a glass of wine instead if you’d prefer.”

“Sure,” he accepts.

Hannibal smiles. “Perfect. I’ll show you to the guest rooms so you can settle in while I look for a bottle.”

Hannibal leads them to the second floor, where Hannibal’s room and study are, next to the two empty guest rooms. Both of them have their own bathrooms, and Hannibal tells them to feel free to use any toiletries they might need.

“Dad, can I sleep with you?” Beth asks, probably afraid of sleeping alone in a room in a stranger’s house.

Will is about to accept when Elijah exits the bathroom and wraps an arm around the girl’s shoulders.

“I’ll sleep with you,” he says. “So Will doesn’t wake us up too early when he leaves for the airport,” he says.

“Ah, you’re right,” Beth accepts.

“If he goes to sleep at all,” Elijah adds with a smirk and a wink.

“Elijah, don’t,” Will scolds.

Beth looks between the both of them, confused.

“Go have a drink with Doctor Lecter, Will,” Elijah encourages him. “Have a good day tomorrow.”

“Let us know when your plane lands, dad,” Beth says.

“Of course, love,” Will tells her with a smile. “Sleep well.”

He kisses the little girl on the forehead, and smiles at Elijah, who simply wiggles his eyebrows at him. Will rolls his eyes and leaves them in the hallway to go down the stairs and into the kitchen where Hannibal is waiting, already serving two glasses of red wine. He also notices there’s a piece of paper next to it on the counter.

“Ah, right on time,” Hannibal says when he notices him. He walks towards him and hands him his glass.

“Thank you,” Will says before taking a sip. It tastes better than any wine he has ever drank. He wonders how expensive it might be. “What’s that?” he asks, pointing at the paper.

“That is your psychological evaluation.” Hannibal hands him it, smiling. “You are totally functional and more or less sane. Congratulations,” he jokes.

Will laughs, taking it. “Thank you. Jack will be happy to know he didn’t break me.”

“And our conversation can proceed unobstructed by paperwork,” Hannibal says.

They drink the wine in silence for a few moments.

“I think it’d be better if we use my car to go to the airport tomorrow,” Hannibal comments, refilling Will’s glass. “I have plenty of space in my garage if you wish to leave your car there.”

“I don’t have any clothes to change into,” Will remembers. The dress pants, shirt, and coat he wore to the theater are hardly comfortable for a flight and/or working at a crime scene.

“I can lend you some,” Hannibal suggests.

Will raises an eyebrow. “I can’t wear a three-piece suit at work,” he says.

Hannibal chuckles. “Believe it or not, Will, I own casual clothing as well.”

“It’s hard to imagine you wearing anything casual.”

Hannibal leaves the glass on top of the counter. “Let’s go to my bedroom, I’ll lend you a bag and you can pick whatever you’d like to wear.”

The room is filled with antiques and decorations that Will is sure cost more than his salary, but everything is so characteristically Hannibal that it makes him smile. He looks at the king-sized bed and the black silk sheets for a second too long before moving his gaze to the door of the walk-in closet Hannibal is opening.

“Take a look,” Hannibal says, gesturing with his hand at him to walk in first. “Feel free to try on anything you like.”

Will hums, looking around. Hannibal has more clothes than he and his kids combined, and everything is organized by color and category. He feels as if he were in an elite clothing store.

“Are you a Virgo?” he blurts out before he can stop himself.

“Do you believe in astrology?” Hannibal asks, not a note of disdain in his voice, just simple curiosity.

“No, um, Isabela does— Elijah’s girlfriend, she’s always talking about it,” he says. Elijah is a Virgo himself, and the characteristics she explained of the sign stuck to Will’s mind because of how accurate they were in some aspects.

He’s always found Isabela and Elijah’s relationship interesting. They met through friends in common at one of Elijah’s swimming competitions, where she had gone to watch another friend compete. Outside that, they have very little stuff in common, Elijah being very logical and practical, and Isabela much more superstitious and akin to the spiritual. Opposites attract, as they say.

That line of thought makes Will think about how different yet similar Hannibal and himself are, so he changes the subject before saying something stupid.

“Your murder suit isn’t here,” he teases.

Hannibal smiles. “No, I keep it in my basement,” he says. “Maybe I’ll show it to you one day,” he adds in a much softer voice.

It makes Will’s body warm all over. “You’d let me see your murder room?” he asks, softly, hopeful. He knows how much Hannibal appreciates his privacy.

“Some other time, if you’d like.” Hannibal grabs a few shirts from the hangers and then opens a drawer. “I’m curious, how do you imagine it?”

Will absentmindedly touches the clothes hanging on the racks as he walks. “Full of medical equipment, but not for healing,” he replies. “Soundproofed, of course, maybe hidden under a trap door, or disguised as something else, like a wine cellar,” he adds.

“You have a good instinct,” Hannibal says.

Will grabs a plain white shirt from one of the hangers and positions it in front of his body. It seems a bit smaller than the rest, and Will thinks it might fit him.

“Can I try this on?” he asks.

“Of course.” Hannibal motions Will to the large mirror on one of the walls. “I believe that shirt might be your size. Someone bad at guessing sizes gave it to me as a gift for my last birthday.”

Will laughs as he unbuttons his current shirt to try this one on.

“If it fits you well, you may keep it if you’d like.”

“Won’t the person who gifted it to you be offended?” Will asks, shirt now completely off. His eyes automatically travel to the scars on his chest, still a shade whiter than the rest of his skin. Even though it’s been so many years since his surgery, he still can’t break the habit of checking that place as soon as he takes off his shirt.

“What they don't know can't harm them," Hannibal replies with a smile.

Will chuckles and tries it on. Hannibal is right, it is exactly his size. The clothing hugs his torso nicely. He catches Hannibal’s eyes on him and he has to turn away to hide his blush.

“Do you think Abigail will confess anything to us?” He switches the subject for the second time in the evening, taking the shirt off to fold it and save it on the travel bag Hannibal provided for him.

“We’ll have to create a reality safe enough for her to do so.”

“And how do you suggest we do that, doctor?” Will asks with just a hint of flirtation.

“We’ll have plenty of opportunities to speak with her tomorrow.”

“Alana will be there.” Will reminds him while he grabs a pair of jeans he’s never imagined Hannibal would have in his closet, and silently asks him if he can try them on. The man nods.

“Yes, we’ll have to be discreet,” Hannibal says. “She doesn’t think Abigail is a killer, nor that she helped her father, not yet.”

“We have to make sure she keeps thinking that way,” Will says.

“What shall we say to Jack if he doesn’t believe Abigail doesn’t have anything to do with the murders?” Hannibal asks. He has considerately turned his back to Will while he takes his pants off to try the new ones.

“We should figure out what she knows and doesn’t know, then go from there,” Will decides. The jeans fit him a bit more loosely than the shirt did, but nothing that a belt (that he’d also have to borrow) won’t fix.

“I agree,” Hannibal says. “Those suit you nicely. They look much better on you,” he sees when he sees Will.

The profiler blushes and clears his throat. “Thanks.”

They pack a few more clothes each in peaceful silence. When they finish, Hannibal offers to load the bags in the car to make sure they don’t forget them the next morning. Will retires to his guest room and texts his neighbors first, and then Beverly to inform her of Elijah’s plan.

Once that’s done, he gets into bed, marveling at how nice the sheets feel against his skin. It doesn’t take him long to fall asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Just in case, I'm letting you know that the next few weeks are going to be pretty busy with exams and essays as the semester is coming to an end. If I don't update next Saturday, that's why!

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Hello!

I apologize for the tardiness in uploading this chapter, I hope the length can make up for the wait. I remind you that if you see anything that needs to be tagged and I haven't tagged it yet, please let me know. I really hope I can get the next part out on time since I passed last Saturday's exam with a good grade and have more free time now! Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will silently opens the door of the guest room his kids are staying in to check on them before leaving. They are both still asleep, Beth curled up, both hands under her pillow, while Elijah lies on his back, slightly snoring and hugging the edge of the duvet. Will smiles, endeared, and whispers a goodbye before exiting the room.

Hannibal drives them to the airport, both sipping their coffees in comfortable silence. They arrive, check-in, and find Alana and Abigail waiting already, also drinking coffee. Alana notices them and smiles, eyes staying a bit longer on Will. He doesn't need his empathy to know that she has noticed his outfit mostly consists of Hannibal's clothes and she's trying to figure out why that is.

"Good morning ladies," Hannibal greets them with a smile.

"Good morning," Alana replies, making an effort not to stare at Will too much.

Will notices the corner of Hannibal's lips curving up slightly and automatically knows he is happy she noticed, smiling in a strange show of possessiveness that, somehow, makes Will feel fond.

"Morning," Abigail says, and then she yawns, clearly not accustomed to waking up this early.

"How are you, Abigail?" Will asks.

"Cold, mostly," she says with a faint smile before taking another sip of her drink.

"If it goes on like this, we might have a white Christmas this year," Hannibal comments.

"I have to admit, I'm a bit disappointed that you're not hosting a dinner party on Christmas Eve this time," Alana says to Hannibal.

"I'm afraid these last few weeks have been a bit too hectic," he says, "but maybe I'll manage to organize something in time for New Year's instead."

"Jack has everyone overworked," Will sighs. "It's like all serial killers waited until the holiday season arrived to start killing."

Hannibal looks at him with amusement, Alana not so much. Abigail mostly just looks sleepy and absentminded.

Will reaches for his pocket to down an aspirin, a habit by now, but doesn't find the container in its usual place. He frowns and pats the rest of his pockets down until the image of the pill bottle on the mirror shelf of the guest bedroom's bathroom at Hannibal's house comes to mind.

He clicks his tongue. "Shit, I left my aspirins at your house," he says.

"Does your head continue to hurt?" Hannibal asks him. "You should really set a neurologist appointment, Will," he reminds him, then: "I should have a bottle of them in my bag." He opens it and searches around.

"Thanks," Will smiles at him when he hands him the bottle, identical to the one he always carries around with him.

Alana is eyeing them curiously but doesn't say anything, quietly observing as Will dry swallows the aspirin.

Once they board their plane, Hannibal and Will sit together as their boarding pass tickets indicate, while Alana takes her seat with Abigail in the row right in front of them. Hannibal contemplates the very small space to stretch his legs with disdain, making Will laugh.

"Used to flying first class, Doctor Lecter?" he teases.

"I'm afraid so," he admits.

"I've never flown first class," Will confesses as he watches with mirth how Hannibal struggles to find a comfortable position for his legs.

"Why is that, Will?" Hannibal asks. "I've heard FBI agents' salaries aren't that bad."

"Well, I'm not officially an agent," Will replies, even when what Hannibal is saying isn't wrong. "Habits are hard to break, I guess," he adds.

"Your family struggled financially when you were a child?"

"More than struggled, we were poor," Will replies, "I followed my father from the boat yards in Biloxi and Greenville to lake boats on Erie."

"Always the new kid at school? Always the stranger?"

"Always." Will sighs. "You grew up rich?"

"When I was very young, yes, until my parents died," Hannibal confesses. "I moved from orphanage to orphanage until I was adopted by my uncle when I was sixteen."

"I'm sorry," Will apologizes. "I shouldn't have assumed."

"No need to apologize, you were right in assuming a great part of what I have comes from my heritage, although another big part of it it's the fruit of my labor in the medical field." Hannibal takes a sketchbook and black pencil from the small travel bag he placed under his seat as he replies.

“Why did you stop being a surgeon?”

Hannibal looks at the line of seats in front of them briefly then returns his gaze to the sketchbook he opens on a blank page.

“I killed someone, or better said, I couldn’t save someone,” he replies, in an obvious lie that lets Will know this is not the place to answer such questions.

“Pretty common occurrence in the ER,” Will says anyway, “it must have happened often.”

“It happened one time too many,” Hannibal says. “Plus, with psychiatry, I have a freer schedule to indulge in my many hobbies.”

Will chuckles, sharing a conspiratorial smile with him.

Hannibal begins to draw. “You should take a nap, Will, you didn’t get much sleep last night,” he suggests.

Will is aware of the sudden silence coming from where Alana and Abigail were quietly speaking with each other mere seconds ago. Oh, Hannibal really *is* possessive. They’re not even dating. “Yet”, his mind throws at him. He shakes the thought off.

“I’m used to it, my dreams tend to wake me multiple times at night,” Will says. “Besides, you got even less sleep than I did.”

Hannibal had stayed packing for longer, Will could still hear him walking when he went to bed.

“I don’t require much sleep, a habit that stayed with me from my time at the ER,” Hannibal says, clearly pleased with Will’s answer. “I’m still worried about your headache, Will, you seemed to be running a low fever last night. I must insist on you visiting a neurologist as soon as we get back.”

“I’ve been meaning to,” Will says.

“I’ll ring up a colleague of mine, I’m sure he wouldn’t mind making space on his schedule for a friend. Have the hallucinations persisted?”

Will sighs. “I haven’t had any recently, only moments when I don’t know if I’m dreaming or not, but that’s not far from common for me with my imagination,” he replies.

“What do you dream about?”

“A stag, lately, following me around,” he confesses, closing his eyes and resting his head against the headrest.

“In Christianity, a stag is a symbol for Christ,” Hannibal comments, “while the Celts believed it brought messages from the spirit world.” Then he adds after a pause. “It also appears as a moral reminder if the person is veering off the path of righteousness.”

Will lets out a dry, low laugh. “Been doing that for a while,” he whispers to himself.

He’ll have to speak with Hannibal about their first kills some time, he’s very curious about it.

“Sleep, Will,” Hannibal tells him, squeezing his arm for a brief moment. “I’ll make sure no stags follow you out of your dreams when you wake.”

Will dreams with the stag again, of course. This time the stag is standing on the center of a stage and Will is in the public, but slowly begins walking towards it. The lights of the stage are bright, almost blinding, and Will struggles to see properly. His feet stop moving then, still standing in the shadows. One more step and he would be in the light next to the stag, but he’s paralyzed, it’s impossible to advance any further.

Hannibal wakes him up when the plane is landing. Will thanks him and stretches his body, bones cracking. He grabs his phone to check his messages as he turns the airplane mode off. He has a couple of messages from Elijah and Beth, letting them know that they’ll be going to Isabela’s house for breakfast and then to the mall. There’s an attached mirror selfie of Beth in Hannibal’s guest bathroom with the caption “THIS MIRROR IS SO PRETTY”, which makes Will smile. He sends a quick reply informing them he’s already in Minnesota and to enjoy their day.

They arrive at the Hobbs’ residence at around 9:30 am. Abigail stares at the faded rust-colored stain on the front step, where her mother died. Will takes notice of her eyes brimmed with tears yet devoid of emotion.

“I was sort of expecting a body outline in chalk or tape,” she says.

“They only do that if you’re still alive and taken to the hospital before they finish the crime scene,” Will explains to her.

Those words wash over Abigail like she’s barely aware of them. Interesting.

“Goodbye, mom,” she says simply before continuing forwards in the direction of the door.

Alana and Abigail enter the house together, closely followed by Hannibal and Will, who silently communicate with their eyes. With every second, their theory of Abigail being involved in her father’s crimes becomes stronger.

“If you ever want to go,” Alana speaks when Abigail lingers in the doorway, “you just have to say so and we’ll go.”

“Go where?” she asks. “Back to the hospital?”

“For now.”

Abigail shakes her head and Alana and Hannibal hang back a little bit to allow Will to enter the kitchen with the teenager, who notices the turned pictures on the fridge.

“They turned all the pictures over,” she comments.

“Crime scene cleaners will do that,” Alana says.

Abigail glances at the clean table and the linoleum floor. “They did a very good job. Is that where all my blood was?”

“Yes,” Will replies.

“You do this all the time? Go places and think about killing?” she asks, turning around to look at him.

“Too often,” Will confesses.

“So you pretended to be my dad?”

“And people like your dad.”

“You think you knew him?”

“I tried to know him. I still try.”

“Even after you killed him?”

“Maybe even *more* because I killed him.”

“No wonder you have nightmares,” Abigail recalls their talk in the hospital.

“We should discuss yours,” Hannibal tells her.

“The attacks on you and your mother were different,” Will says, ignoring Hannibal. “Desperate. Your dad knew he was out of time. Someone told him we were coming.”

“The man on the phone?” Abigail asks, looking at the object.

“It was a blocked call,” he continues. “Did you recognize the voice?”

Hannibal looks at him with curiosity, not anger. Will silently uses his eyes to ask him to trust him.

“I had never heard it before,” she replies, quickly and easily, but her eyes betray her, almost imperceptibly glancing at Hannibal for a short second.

Will represses a smile. His instinct was right. She knows. She knows and she’s protecting Hannibal, without being asked. That makes things easier for them.

Later, they leave Alana and Abigail inside while Hannibal and Will exit the house to scrub at the graffiti on the garage door that spells “cannibals” in black paint.

“She knows you’re the one that called,” Will whispers as they work, very close to each other to not risk being overheard.

“Smart girl,” Hannibal says.

“Why wouldn’t she say anything?” Will asks.

“I don’t know,” Hannibal admits. “I’m curious about that myself.”

“Do you think she senses something about you?”

“You believe I remind her of her father?” Hannibal considers it. “Maybe we can use that.”

Will wants to ask what he means exactly, but the girls come outside so they put an end to their conversation.

“You’re not going to find any of those girls, you know,” Abigail comments, carrying a bucket of soapy water in their direction.

“Why do you say that?” Will asks.

“He’d honor every part of them,” she explains. “Made plumbers putty out of elk bones, or at least that’s what he told us. Whatever bones were left of those girls is probably holding pipes together.”

“Where did he make this putty?” Hannibal asks.

“At the cabin,” she replies. “I can show you. Tomorrow, it’s a bit far from here.”

“Abigail,” Alana calls, looking in the direction of the forest. “There’s someone here.”

The other three turn around. A girl about Abigail’s age is standing a few feet away from them. She waves at Abigail whose face completely lits up. She looks at them as if asking for permission and turns to the girl when Alana nods at her. They greet each other and take a walk, following the stream near the house.

After a while, the sound of loud voices and cursing brings Hannibal and Will’s attention back to them.

“You were the bait, weren’t you?” a male voice loudly claims. “Is that how it worked? Lure them back to daddy for dinner? Is that how you trapped my sister?”

“Piss off,” Marissa, Abigail’s friend, tells him as she picks up a rock and throws it in the boy’s direction.

He sidesteps to avoid it and continues to speak.

“You helped dad cut my sister’s lungs out while she was still using them?”

He sounds desperate. Will almost feels bad for him. If the man is talking about cut lungs, he’s probably Cassie Boyle’s brother, and her death is far from being Abigail’s fault.

Marissa throws another rock, this time striking him on the forehead and leaving a small gash. He stumbles, briefly silenced. He looks back up, clutching his bloody head wound, but reacts quickly and runs when he notices the two approaching men. At the same time, a middle-aged woman approaches the group from the opposite side.

“Marissa!” she calls firmly. “Come. Home.”

“Can you stop being such a bitch?” Marissa snaps.

Hannibal looks at her with murder in his eyes and Will represses a laugh. He has to remind himself not to curse too much in the other man’s presence lest he finds himself becoming an ingredient for his dinner.

“Marissa,” her mother insists.

“See you later,” she says, reluctantly, to Abigail after rolling her eyes at her mother.

“Bye,” Abigail replies.

“Who was the boy?” Hannibal asks as they walk in the house’s direction.

“Somebody’s brother.”

“Try not to kill Abigail’s friend,” Will sneaks closer to Hannibal’s ear to whisper. “I saw how you look at her. It’s too risky.”

“It’s a shame, but I agree,” Hannibal whispers back. “She was quite rude.”

“Is that motive enough?” Will asks.

“Rudeness is unspeakably ugly to me,” he declares.

“Yet you didn’t kill me when we first met.” Will raises his eyebrows at him, teasing. He doesn’t give Hannibal time to reply and turns to Abigail. “You’ve never seen him before?”

“No.” She shakes her head.

“We should report this, yes?” Hannibal asks.

“Yes,” Will nods.

The late afternoon comes faster than they expected. Will takes a moment to ring up his sitter, who updates him on the dogs and reassures him that they can take care of them for whatever long necessary until he returns to Virginia. Meanwhile, Hannibal is in the kitchen with him, preparing coffee. Abigail is downstairs, and Alana is outside, also making a call.

Just at the moment Will hangs up, there comes a loud sound from downstairs, like from someone falling to the ground. Hannibal and Will look at each other, then immediately exit the kitchen.

“Abigail?” Will calls.

At the same time, Alana comes inside the house.

“What happened?” she asks, frowning.

They hear footsteps on the stairs and Will, who is closer to them, sees Abigail walking up with blood in her hands, looking shocked. He reacts quickly and slams Alana’s head to the wall in one move, careful not to do more than simply knock her out. Hannibal is surprised for a moment until he sees Abigail’s state when she reaches the top of the stairs. She seems stunned by Will’s sudden brutality.

“She’ll be alright,” Will tries to soothe her.

“Abigail,” Hannibal says. “Show us what happened.”

They follow the girl to the recreation room on the lower floor and cautiously enter the room. There, they find the corpse of the guy Marissa attacked with the rock earlier, disemboweled, and slumped in the room. Abigail doesn't weep, simply stares, the black on her eyes almost covering the blue completely.

Will squats next to her, placing a reassuring hand on her shoulder. She is terrified, he can feel it, traumatized by what she just did and surprised by her own instinctual actions.

"Abigail," he talks, gently, trying to bring her back to the real world.

"He was going to kill me," she blurts out.

"Was he?" Hannibal asks, squatting near the body, analyzing it. "This isn't self-defense, Abigail, you butchered him."

Will and Abigail look at the body.

"I didn't…" she trails off, not knowing how to defend what she did.

"They will see what you did and they will see you as an accessory to the crimes of your father," Hannibal declares.

"I wasn't," Abigail says, firmly, looking him directly in the eyes.

Hannibal looks at Will. It's proving to be more difficult to gain the teenager's trust than they predicted.

"We can help you," Will says, opting for a more friendly approach. "If you ask us to," then decides to add for the sake of appearances, just in case, "at great risk of our careers and lives."

"You have a choice," Hannibal continues. "You can tell them you were defending yourself when you gutted this man, or we can help you hide the body."

Will can almost hear her mind and thoughts racing, trying to think as rationally as possible despite the distress she's feeling. She stays silent for a couple of long seconds until she finally speaks, this time sounding on the verge of breaking down.

"Help me," she begs. "Please."

"Of course," Hannibal says.

Will gives her a smile that he hopes is reassuring.

"What's the plan?" he asks Hannibal, hoping that he does have one.

"We'll say that this young man attacked us, knocked off Alana, hurt you," he tells Will. "He was trying to harm Abigail, he believed she helped her father kill his sister. He ran when he realized he was outnumbered. I was concerned for Abigail's wellbeing, he had her trapped against the wall, so I stopped to check if she was okay first and couldn't follow him."

"Well thought," Will approves. "You'll have to hit me somewhere, leave a mark."

Hannibal nods. “An elbow to the ribs can be hurtful enough to believably incapacitate you for a couple of minutes, or at least slow you down if caught by surprise.”

Will nods. It sounds reasonable. “We’ll have to clean the blood before Alana wakes up,” he says, eyeing the red puddle.

“I’ll take Abigail with me and hide the body,” Hannibal decides. “I trust you can clean it fast enough?”

“Yes,” Will says. The blood is fresh enough. It should be a rather quick process. “Abigail, is there a bottle of bleach and hydrogen peroxide anywhere in the house?” Will asks.

“There has to be, um,” she says, struggling to think. “In the laundry room. Yes, there.”

“Great,” Will says. “I’ll start with this and call the cops and an ambulance for Alana,” he adds. “I’m sure I don’t have to remind you to cover any footprints you leave behind, Doctor Lecter?” he teases Hannibal.

“Of course not,” he says, smiling, then approaches him. “May I?” he asks, pointing to the side of Will’s chest.

“Please be gentle, doctor,” Will says as he playfully bats his eyelashes at him.

“I want you to count down with me, Will, and relax as much as you can, okay?” Hannibal says, ignoring his teasing.

Will nods.

“Ready? Three…two…one,” Hannibal counts down before striking him.

The pain makes Will’s breath catch for a second and double over. It’s not sharp enough to break his ribs, but strong enough to leave a visible bruise.

“Breath, Will,” Hannibal tells him, grabbing him by the shoulders to straighten him. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” he says, nodding. “I’ve been stabbed before, I can handle this. You two leave, hurry up.”

“Good.” Hannibal crouches down and grabs the corpse, lifting it as if it weighs absolutely nothing.

The action has no right to be that attractive.

“See you soon, Will,” Hannibal says. Abigail stands quietly next to the psychiatrist.

“Be careful, both of you.”

As soon as they leave, he rolls up his sleeves and gets started. He’ll have to be quick. He feels as if someone is watching him for a moment and he turns to the door in case Hannibal forgot something and has come to look for it, but there’s no one there. He blinks, shakes his head, cursing his mind for playing tricks on him, then returns to cleaning.

“I don’t remember anything,” Alana says. She is sitting in the back of the ambulance, the side of her head bandaged. Will sits on the bench across from her, holding an ice pack to his injured rib. “There was a blur on the corner of my eye, then a big, fat cut to black.”

“Nicholas Boyle attacked Abigail. You,” Will says. A quick Facebook search through Cassie Boyle’s profile allowed him to find out the name of the man. “Elbowed my ribs. He tried to injure Hannibal but realized he was outnumbered and ran instead, just like he did earlier.”

“Where is Abigail?” Alana asks.

“Hannibal took her back to the motel,” Will replies. “She’s okay, Alana, just scared. Hannibal thought it was better for her to be away from the house for a while.”

“He’s probably right,” Alana concedes, “especially with the number of reporters surrounding it..”

The sirens from the police cars and the ambulance have brought even more attention to the Hobbs’ residence, now filled with curious people and reporters trying to find out what had happened.

After making sure their injuries aren’t too bad, the police officers question them for a while before deciding they are free to go.

“Hey,” Abigail greets them at the door of the motel room when they arrive, immediately throwing her arms around Will. He blinks, surprised, but promptly hugs her back. “I’m so glad you guys are okay.”

“The important thing is that you’re safe,” Alana says.

“I’m sorry,” Abigail tells her. “I should've screamed or called you as soon as I saw him, but I was so shocked I couldn’t react on time.”

“No need for apologies, Abigail, it’s not your fault,” Alana reassures her.

“We can just hope he’ll be caught soon,” Hannibal says.

“Well,” Will says, trying to lift the mood a bit. “Should we head inside? We bought dinner.” He raises the bag he’s holding in his hand to eye level.

“Pizza?” Abigail smiles.

“Yes,” Will nods. “I hope you like the types we chose.”

“As long as there are no pineapples.”

“I’m sorry this isn’t gourmet enough for your tastes, Doctor Lecter,” Will says to Hannibal, teasingly as they enter the room.

“I’m sure you’ll make up for it some other time.” Hannibal winks, a feline smile on his lips.

Will swallows, hard, feeling his cheeks heating. He knows Hannibal is referring to sharing another meal together someday, but the way he says it makes it sound suggestive, like something different. He's aware of Alana's eyes on them, while Abigail is too distracted checking the food boxes to notice what they were saying.

During dinner, they conclude that it'll be better to sleep in pairs, just in case Nick Boyle decides to show up. Obviously, everyone except Alana is aware that that isn't going to happen, but Will has no plans of arguing against the idea. Hannibal and he need to have a talk. If they have to share a bed for it…well, it's not like Will minds.

While Hannibal takes a shower, Will calls Beverly to check on his kids as he searches for a shirt to sleep in inside the small suitcase Hannibal let him borrow.

"Hey Will!" She greets him. "How's the investigation going? Found anything?"

He's glad Jack hasn't informed the BAU team of Nick Boyle's disappearance yet. It's bad enough he wants to come in person to Minnesota. Will had to spend around twenty minutes convincing him it'd be a waste of time for him to do so.

"Nothing much, we mostly have been helping Abigail pack and clean, to be honest," Will says with a sigh.

"Are you staying the night?"

"Yes, we want to check out the Hobbs' cabin tomorrow, see how Abigail behaves."

"Do you think Jack is right about her?"

"I don't know," Will admits. "She's traumatized by what happened, she'll need more time to open up about it."

"Poor girl," Beverly says.

"Yeah." A pause, then, "Any new cases?"

"Yes, nothing too complicated. Jack won't bother you with it."

"How are Elijah and Beth?"

"Oh, they've been fighting about which character of the movie they watched with Isabela is the best one for hours," she says.

Will laughs. "That sounds like them."

"Elijah has become quite fond of Olive," she comments. "I'm afraid he'll kidnap her, to be honest. I don't want her to get eaten by your pack."

"Hey, my pack is very well trained," Will complains. "They'd never kill a cat."

The bathroom door opens at that moment and Hannibal emerges, wearing a set of red pajama pants but no shirt, a towel wrapped around his shoulders, and hair still dripping. Will tries his best not to stare, but Hannibal walking closer and bending down to grab a shirt from his suitcase isn't helping his cause. The muscles in his arms tense and flex, and *oh* , a water droplet slides down the side of

his neck to his chest and then his waist, to finally disappear under the elastic band of his pants. Will's lips part and he has to bite back a gasp that threatens to escape his throat.

His attention is brought back to the call by Beverly's voice.

"Will?" she calls. "Will?"

"Sorry?"

"What got you so distracted, curls?" she asks, amused.

"Nothing, what were you saying?"

"Elijah and Beth told me you've been getting along with Doctor Lecter," she says, then gasps exaggeratedly. "Were there budget cuts and now you have to share a room with him? Is there only one bed?"

Well, she isn't completely wrong. Her words have Will checking that he isn't video calling by accident.

"Don't be ridiculous," he replies as he watches Hannibal put on his shirt. He's lying a lot these days.

"It's about time you find someone, you know," Beverly keeps teasing him. "You're the only single one in our group."

"What about Z?"

"Z is never single, his relationships just don't last more than two days." They both laugh at that.

"Tell the kids I said goodnight," Will says after a few more word exchanges.

"Of course. Say goodbye to Doctor Sexy for me."

"Beverly," Will groans as his friend laughs.

"Goodnight," she says.

"Night."

Will sighs after he hangs up, and drops the phone on the bed.

"Everything okay at home?" Hannibal asks him.

"Yes, everything alright," Will replies. "I wish I didn't have to leave them," he confesses, "but Bev and Stella are great babysitters."

"How did the three of you meet?" Hannibal sits on the right side of the bed, opposite Will's.

"At college," Will replies, smiling at the memory. "Beverly was my roommate, actually. She helped me through the entire pregnancy and took care of Beth after, like a stepmother, honestly," he explains. "Stella joined in when they started dating. She helped me so much with figuring out my identity," he continues. "I didn't know what being trans was until I met her. I always knew there

was something off about me, but I thought it was a result of my empathy disorder, clouding my judgment, making me feel more than I was supposed to."

"But it wasn't just that?"

"No," Will shakes his head. "I found myself still wanting to be perceived by society as a boy, even when I was alone. I felt so weird when I realized it. I lived in a very small town at the time, in the middle of nowhere. I knew one gay classmate, that was it."

"But then you moved to college."

"I moved to college, I met Beverly," Will says, nodding. "She was the first person I confessed all of what I was feeling to. Then she introduced me to the straight-gay alliance on campus and it blew my mind," he chuckles.

"Do you still keep in contact with them?" Hannibal asks.

"Mostly just Beverly and Stella, but I still speak with some of them from time to time," he says. "They always ask for pictures of Beth," he adds, fondly. "I don't know what I would have done without them helping me, taking care of her when I had exams or work."

"If you don't mind me asking, what happened to her other father?" Hannibal inquiries.

"Nothing, uh, we weren't dating or anything when I got pregnant, just hooking up," Will replies. "I only found out I was pregnant when I had already moved to Washington, and he had left for college as well to a different state. He didn't find out about it until we met by chance while I was working as a cop. He calls from time to time to see how she's doing and sends Beth cards for her birthday, but not much more." Will sighs. "He's a nice guy, but he lives in a different state and has his own life. I'm happy with taking care of Beth by myself."

It's the most he has spoken about himself to someone in years.

"What about you, doctor?" Will asks after some moments of silence. "Quid pro quo?"

"I can't say with certainty when I figured out my sexual orientation," Hannibal confesses. "I think I always knew about it. Always too curious about too many things to not experiment."

"And that orientation is…?"

"Pansexual, I think, is the correct term for it," Hannibal replies. "Although romantic feelings are a bit more complicated for me," he adds, face sombering.

"You've never been in love?" Will asks.

"No," Hannibal shakes his head. "The only person I felt unconditional love for was my sister," he admits.

"Was?"

"She's dead."

"I'm sorry," Will says quickly, hesitating but ultimately deciding to squeeze Hannibal's hand.

The man smiles in appreciation. “Do not worry, it happened many years ago.”

“I am the same,” Will says after a while. “I’ve never been in love either, I mean.”

“No?”

“Never,” Will declares. *This is uncharted territory for us both* , he wants to add.

They look at each other for a moment in comfortable silence, until a yawn escapes Will and breaks the moment.

“I should go brush my teeth.” He gets up to head for the bathroom. “And we need to talk about Abigail,” he remembers.

Hannibal is under the blankets with his iPad on his lap when Will walks back into the room.

“What did you do with the body?” Will asks. They’re going to be in trouble if it gets found in some way and it’s missing organs.

“Buried it in the forest,” Hannibal says. “The snow will keep it from being found until spring, at least,” he adds. “I’m pretty confident in my ability to hide bodies, you have nothing to be concerned about.”

“Let’s hope Abigail keeps the secret as well.” Will climbs into the bed, groaning when he notices that Hannibal is checking TattleCrime. “Seriously, Hannibal?”

“I can’t say that I enjoy Miss Lound’s sensationalist writing,” Hannibal says, “but she is usually the first one to report on things. She’s in Minnesota.” Hannibal shows Will the picture in the article: a blurry image of Alana and him sitting in the back of the ambulance.

“Shit,” Will curses. “What did she write about?”

“She talks about something strange happening now that Abigail is back in Minnesota,” he explains, skimming over the text. “And she implies that you being here has also something to do with it.”

Will sighs. “Well, technically, she isn’t wrong.”

“Don’t worry about Abigail, Will,” Hannibal changes the subject. “She doesn’t gain anything by Nick Boyle being found out.”

“She has nothing to gain and everything to lose?” Will asks. “I don’t know. Teenagers are complicated.” He yawns again, leaning against the pillows. “She was suspiciously apathetic today.”

“It might be the trauma,” Hannibal says. He turns off the tablet and leaves it on the bedside table.

“I don’t think she’s a psychopath, doctor, but she isn’t innocent either.” Will stretches, then lays down his head on the pillow.

“What do you think her role in her father’s crimes was?” Hannibal imitates him, lying down as well, facing Will.

“Most likely the lure,” Will replies. He tries not to get too distracted by their closeness. “She might have helped his father meet the girls, and talked to them, but I don’t think she helped him kill them.

You saw how shocked she looked when she attacked Boyle."

"Impressive quick thinking, back then, knocking out Alana," Hannibal takes the opportunity to say.

Will smiles, smug. "Considering me as a partner in crime, doctor?"

"I can't think of anyone better for the job," Hannibal replies with a smile of his own.

"How long do you think she'll take to confess to us?" Will asks.

"Not much longer," Hannibal says. "Maybe even tomorrow."

Will shifts, trying to turn around on the bed, and hisses in pain.

"What's wrong?" Hannibal asks.

"Someone hit me on the ribs, remember?" Will teases, his hands covering the wound over his shirt.

"Let me check it," Hannibal requests.

"It's not necessary, I'll be fine. It just hurts a bit, nothing I can't handle."

"Let me check anyway," Hannibal insists. "Just to be sure."

Will accepts in the end and straightens, sitting down on the bed.

"May I?" Hannibal asks, tugging slightly at the hem of his shirt.

Will's heart shouldn't be beating as hard as it is. "Go ahead," he nods, licking his lips.

Hannibal raises his shirt, baring just enough skin to look at the bruise, now purpling, on the side of torso. He applies light pressure on it and Will holds his breath as Hannibal's fingers feel the skin, making sure the bones under them are okay.

"You don't have broken ribs," Hannibal says, still touching him. "Still, it would be better to apply some ointment to the skin to help soothe the pain and reduce the bruising," he says.

He gets up from the bed and Will watches as he takes a medical kit out from his bag and grabs a small plastic jar then walks back to him.

Hannibal uncaps it and doesn't say anything, dipping his fingers in the cream and rubbing them on Will's skin. They're so close Will can see the way Hannibal's chest moves up and down with every breath he takes, so hypnotized by it that it doesn't even occur to him that he could've protested, telling Hannibal that he can apply the ointment himself.

This attraction he feels is dangerous, all-consuming yet irresistible. He's not sure how much longer he has until he loses his restraint.

The visit to the cabin doesn't reveal much more than what they already know, and nor does the flight back to Baltimore. When they land, Hannibal and Will are called to Jack's office for a report on what happened, while Alana accompanies Abigail to the psychiatric facility she'll be staying at for the time being. After they pretty much tell Jack they don't think Abigail helped her father, and Will insists on going home to be with his children, they're let go.

"Rushing home for Christmas Eve?" Hannibal asks as they're walking down the bureau hallways.

"We like to prepare the turkey together," Will explains. "Elijah is a better cook than I am, as you know."

"I have to try his cooking some day," Hannibal says, then adds when they arrive at the parking lot, "are you free tomorrow evening?"

"Tomorrow afternoon I have to drive Elijah to a party in Baltimore," Will says. "Then I have to attend a small Christmas celebration with Beverly and the others in our usual bar, we organized a secret Santa." Hannibal does a good job hiding his disappointment, but Will picks up on it anyway. "You can come if you'd like," he proposes. "I don't know if the bar will meet your standards, but…" he jokes.

Hannibal's face lights up. "I'll be there," he says. "Send me the address and the time."

"Or I could pick you up," Will says. "Your house is on the way."

Hannibal smiles. "It's settled, then.

"Great." Will opens the door of his car. "See you tomorrow night, then. Around seven?"

"I'll be waiting," Hannibal says with a nod, unlocking his car as well.

Will spends the rest of the day at home, finally, with his kids. They eagerly tell him about their time spent with their aunts, and how their day at the mall went. Their dinner is delicious, and they exchange gifts once they're done with it. Elijah and Beth collectively bought him a new leather wallet to replace his old tattered one, along with a small drawing of the dogs done by Beth in watercolors, and a phone case with a dog motif on it bought by Elijah.

"I'm noticing a pattern here," Will joked at the time, smiling at the gifts. "Thank you."

The gift Will bought Beth was a giant pink and white cow plushie that she was now holding close to her chest, trying to keep the dogs from getting their paws or jaws on it. She also got a fantasy book from Elijah and a greeting card, sent from her other father. Will bought Elijah a new videogame, while Beth also did a drawing for him, in this case, of himself and his girlfriend.

They go to bed shortly after, and Will dreams about the stag again. He is in the forest near his house, watching it from a distance, the stag peacefully standing by his side, not approaching but not going away either. It's quiet, peaceful even. The stag doesn't want to hurt him, and Will doesn't feel intimidated by it. He wants to reach, to pet its fur, but something holds him back. He's not ready, not yet.

He is the calmest he's ever been after a vivid dream when he wakes up the following morning.

That late afternoon, Will drives Elijah to the party, reminding him to call if something happens. Elijah rolls his eyes but assures him he will, and then Will drives to Hannibal's house. He parks and gets out of the car to ring the doorbell.

"Good evening, Will," Hannibal greeted him, less formally dressed than usual but still perfectly styled.

"Good evening, Hannibal," Will greets back. He watches as Hannibal turns off the lights and locks the door. "Ready to go?" Hannibal nods and they walk towards the car.

"Good evening, Beth," he greets the young girl sitting in the backseat.

"Hello, Doctor Lecter," she says. "I like your coat," she adds.

"Thank you," he smiles at her, before turning to face the front.

"She has something for you," Will says, fastening his seatbelt. "Don't you, Beth?"

"It's just a drawing," the girl says, searching in her backpack with her cheeks tainted a rosy pink. She finds it and passes it to Hannibal.

He grabs it and examines it in silence for a few seconds, appreciating the girl's drawing skills.

"Lupinus," Hannibal comments regarding the flower drawn on the paper. "People used to believe that lupines devoured all of the nutrients from the soil, like a greedy wolf would," he adds. "It's a beautiful drawing, Beth, thank you."

Will is, once again, amazed at the extent of Beth's empathy, and amused at Hannibal's reaction to the drawing. Will knows the meaning behind the flower as well, of course, and knows it's Beth's subtle way of warning him of Hannibal's nature, or maybe even a threat to Hannibal himself, letting him know that she sees him, without giving up too much. Or maybe she was in the mood to draw lupines and he's just reading too much into it.

She got a *The Meaning of Flowers* book gift from Jimmy for her birthday last year and she's been using it for subtle stuff like this ever since. Will secretly thinks it's a bit creepy, especially combined with her almost psychic-like empathy, but supports his daughter's interests no matter what. She's a great artist.

They arrive at the bar at the stipulated time and Will searches for their table. It's not their usual because, since Beth is with them, they got a table closer to the playground to keep an eye on her as she plays with the rest of the kids. He's glad Ben convinced everyone that making a reservation was the best course of action because the place was pretty crowded, with some people even waiting in line outside.

"Uncle Brian!" Beth exclaims, spotting the table first. She runs to the man's open arms, who hugs her tightly.

"Merry Christmas, little dancer." He ruffles her hair.

"Merry Christmas," Will and Hannibal say when they get to the table.

"Merry Christmas," everyone at the table echoes.

“Thank you for letting me attend the gathering,” Hannibal says, sitting down on the free space on the bench at the right of Beverly. Will sits down in front of him, with Beth squeezing in between Z and himself.

“Oh, we’ve heard a lot about you, Doctor Lecter,” Beverly says, tone almost teasing. “We’re excited to finally meet you.”

“You must be Missus Katz,” Hannibal deduces, offering his hand for her to shake. “Fabric analysis specialist, right?”

She grabs it and shakes it with a smile. “Will told you about me too, huh?” she asks, amused. “This is my wife, Stella.”

Stella grabs his hands and offers him a smile. “Nice to meet you.”

“Pleasure to meet you both,” Hannibal says.

“I’m Jimmy Price, fingerprints specialist,” the man introduces himself, then points to the man sitting in front of him, “and this is my husband Ben.”

“Since everyone is saying their professions, I’m a pharmacist,” he says as he shakes Hannibal’s hand.

“And I’m Brian Zeller,” the last one says. “I’m the one that tells them how people died.”

Once the introductions are over, they call over a waitress to order their food and drinks before resuming their conversation. After a while, Beth gets bored and excuses herself to go play with the other kids in the playground.

“Shall we exchange presents?” Brian asks.

“Already?” Jimmy asks.

“Just in case someone got something inappropriate for the girl’s eyes.” Brian shrugs.

“It’s you, isn’t it? You got something inappropriate,” Beverly deduces.

“Seriously, Brian?” Will sighs, hoping he’s not his secret Santa.

“I’m sorry we don’t have any presents for you, Doctor Lecter,” Jimmy apologizes while the rest complain to Brian. “Will only informed us you were coming yesterday.”

“I didn’t know I was coming until yesterday as well,” Hannibal says with a smile “Do not worry about it. Please, proceed.”

Brian is the first one to grab his gift from the pile. It’s wrapped in red paper, and from it’s size, it’s easy to guess that it’s a book. Everyone at the table laughs when they see the title.

“ *Relationships for dummies?* ” he reads, “seriously? Which one of you fuckers bought this? You think you’re so funny” he complains, but he’s laughing as well.

Beverly proudly raises her hand and everyone cheers for her. She then proceeds to grab her present from the pile as well. It’s a big box, wrapped in glossy green paper with a reindeer motif that

screams Jimmy Price. Inside, there's two expensive bottles of craft beer and two matching glasses. She doesn't even guess who her secret santa is outloud, opting instead for throwing her arms around him in a thankful hug.

Jimmy goes next and almost bursts into tears when he sees that his gift is a hand knitted sweater with the first letter of his name in the middle, courtesy of Stella. Stella then proceeds to open her own gift, which is also book sized but, in her case, it's a simple recipe book that Ben got her.

After that, Will fills with anticipation as Ben reaches for his present, the one he got for him. Ben tends to join him from time to time on his fishing trips, so Will thought it'll be a good idea to get him a handmade fly. He's satisfied when he sees Ben's wide smile.

But now it's his turn, and there's only one person left to be his secret santa so, of course, Will's present has Brian's handwriting on the label, because fuck his life. He takes a deep breath as he unwraps it. There are two boxes inside. He opens the biggest one first and instantly bursts into laughter when he sees its contents, joined by all the others when he shows them: a pair of flip-flops in the shape of two silicon blue fish.

"Since you love fishing so much," Brian says with a smile.

"Thanks," Will says, "I think the dogs will enjoy chewing on them."

"Hey!" Brian complains.

Will hesitates with the other box, wrapped in black paper and with a red bow. He opens it quickly, bracing himself. He takes a look inside and quickly covers the box from view, face getting slightly flushed.

"Brian," he complains, "What is this?"

"You've been single for so long, you might as well have a good time by yourself," the man replies, giggling like a teenager.

"Let me see, let me see." Beverly snatches the box from his hands and drops the contents on the table.

A bullet vibrator falls on the wood with a thud, followed by a small bottle of whiskey-flavored lube. Will sighs as everyone laughs. He refuses to meet anyone's eyes, especially Hannibal's, as Beverly stores the items in the box again and hands it back to him.

"Are you propositioning to Will, Z?" Jimmy jokes.

"You can't keep a relationship for more than a week and he has been single the longest," Beverly continues the teasing. "Maybe you should try to date each other."

"No way in hell," Brian replies quickly, too quickly, so he adds, "I love you, dude, but there's no way."

"We would kill each other," Will agrees.

"He would get his ego hurt 'cause Will's smarter," Jimmy teases.

"Hey!"

“And better in bed too, probably,” Beverly adds.

Will wants to be swallowed by the earth. He hopes he’s not blushing.

Luckily, the waitress arrives with their drinks and the group gets too distracted to continue with that line of conversation, quickly putting all the presents away to make space.

They eat and have their drinks, mostly conversing about their work and the recent case Will missed because he was in Minnesota with Hannibal. The two of them make comments regarding the case and agree to help if they can’t solve it promptly. Beth finishes her food quickly and excuses herself to go back to playing with the rest of the kids. Will goes to the restroom after he’s done with his beer.

Only a few seconds pass before they hear a scream coming from the playground area. Everyone at the tables nearby froze, clear concern for their kids showing on their faces. Hannibal immediately recognizes it as Beth’s voice.

“Was that Beth?” Stella asks at the same time.

“I’ll go check,” Hannibal decides and gets up, closely followed by Ben.

They approach the place, a bunch of concerned parents also scanning the place to confirm their kid wasn’t the one to scream. The soft noise of a girl crying can be heard coming from inside a cylindrical yellow tunnel leading to a slide. A boy comes out of it, looking worried and on the verge of crying himself.

“Young man,” Hannibal uses his softest tone to speak to him. “What happened?”

“A blonde girl is crying, sir,” he replies politely. “I think she hurt her arm.”

Hannibal considers it for a second, but the sounds remind him too much of Mischa and the pang in his heart is too much to bear. He climbs the stairs of the structure, not minding how ridiculous he must look, and crawls into the tunnel to reach Beth, whose face is red. She’s holding her left arm with her right hand as she weeps.

“Beth,” Hannibal calls her calmly. “Beth, did you hurt your arm?” She nods, tears welling in her eyes. “Alright, can you crawl out with me so I can check it properly?”

Beth nods and rubs her face with her good hand before slowly crawling behind Hannibal, careful to not exert any kind of force on her left arm.

“May I carry you?” he asks her once they reach the stairs.

“Thanks,” she accepts, voice hoarse.

Hannibal carefully lifts her and goes back to the table, followed closely by Ben who tries to distract her by making her laugh. He sits Beth on the bench and kneels in front of her.

“What happened?” Will asks, arriving at the table right at that moment. “Beth, what is wrong?” He kneels next to Hannibal.

“I slipped and my wrist made a funny noise,” she replies, teary but visibly more relaxed now that her dad is here as well.

“Oh, love.” Will brings a hand to her face, caressing her slowly. “Luckily we have Doctor Lecter here to check if your arm is okay, right Doctor Lecter?”

“Yes,” he replies with a nod. “May I check your arm?” Hannibal asks.

Beth nods and Hannibal grabs her arm as carefully as he can to not hurt her. She makes a face but doesn’t complain. While Hannibal checks for any signs of a broken bone or a sprain, Will grabs a napkin from the table to help her blow her nose, and dry her tears while whispering sweet words of encouragement.

“The arm is okay,” Hannibal concludes, “but we should apply ice to the bruise to help with the pain.”

“Hear that, love? You’re okay,” Will tells her, then kisses her on her wrist.

“I’ll ask for an ice pack,” Brian says and gets up from the table.

“Thank you, Doctor Lecter,” Beth says with a smile.

“You’re welcome,” he smiles back.

“Thank you, Hannibal,” Will says to him, getting up from the floor to sit on the bench. Beth gets up to sit on her father’s lap.

“It’s nothing, Will,” Hannibal says and sits next to them, where Brian was before.

Brian comes with an ice pack borrowed from the bar’s kitchen and hands it to Will, who holds it against Beth’s wrist. She lets her father help her and remains seated on his lap for the rest of the evening, gradually participating more and more in the conversations, and beginning to smile again.

At some point, Will gazes at one of the windows to check if it’s snowing outside, but instead sees the silhouette of a person. He double checks to make sure that it isn’t just a tree or a shadow, but the figure is gone. He frowns.

“Will? Is anything wrong?” Beverly notices.

He shakes his head. “I thought I saw someone on that window,” Will says. “It must’ve been my imagination,” he dismisses it.

“Don’t tell me you’re drunk already,” Beverly jokes, and the subject is forgotten.

By the time everyone is in the parking lot saying their goodbyes to each other, Hannibal’s phone rings. He waits until he’s inside Will’s car to answer the call then reads the caller ID and frowns.

“What 's wrong?” Will asks, noticing.

“It’s the psychiatric facility Abigail is staying in,” he explains. He answers quickly. “Hello?”

Will looks at him attentively, a dozen images of what could have happened racing through his mind. Beth notices and places a hand on her dad’s leg to calm him down.

“I see,” Hannibal says, calmly. “Yes, of course, we’ll let you know if we see her,” he continues. “Of course, thank you. Have a good night.”

“What happened?” Will asks immediately after he hangs up.

“Abigail escaped,” Hannibal explains.

“Someone took her?” Will can’t help but remember Stammers.

“No, they have camera footage of her leaving on her own, climbing the facility’s walls,” Hannibal replies.

Will sighs, a bit less worried. “Where could she have gone to?” he wonders out loud.

“Somewhere she feels safe, perhaps,” Hannibal says. “Did she have any friends in Baltimore?”

“Her file didn’t say anything about it,” Will replies, shaking his head. “The only person that lives in Baltimore she knows is you.” He looks at Hannibal. “Does she have your address?”

“She has my business card,” he says.

“So she knows your office address,” Will says as he turns on the engine. “She must be there.”

“Agreed.”

They drive in tense silence. Luckily, the bar is not that far from Hannibal’s office and it takes less than twenty minutes to get there. Abigail is sitting on the steps of the front door.

“Stay in the car, Beth,” Will asks. The girl nods.

Hannibal and Will get out of the car and walk towards Abigail, who gets up when she sees them.

“Hello, Abigail,” the psychiatrist greets her.

“How did you know I was here?” she asks.

“Hospital called,” Will explains.

“You climbed over the walls,” Hannibal adds. “Where else would you go? Home is no longer an option.” Will sends him a look that he pointedly ignores. “Should we go inside? It’s freezing out here.”

He unlocks the door and they’re greeted by Hannibal’s waiting room. The man uses another key to unlock his office and lets the three of them inside, closing the door behind them.

“I don’t want to go to sleep,” Abigail confesses, pacing around the room as she looks around.

“You can’t anticipate your dreams,” Hannibal says. “Can’t block them, can’t repress.”

“I didn’t honor any part of him,” she blurts out. “So it’s just murder, isn’t it?”

“Most would argue self-defense.” Will takes a seat on Hannibal’s desk.

“Then why hide the body?” Abigail asks, looking at him. “Why not just tell the truth?”

“Because most would argue self-defense, Abigail,” Will explains.

“There would still be those who would say you were taking after your father,” Hannibal adds.

Abigail freezes and looks at him. “You’re glad I killed him,” she accuses.

Will frowns and looks at Hannibal as well. He curses internally at himself for not seeing it before. Of course, Hannibal was happy about Abigail killing someone, he was just as curious about her darkness as he was about Will’s when they first met.

“What would be the alternative?” Hannibal effectively avoids the question by asking another one. “That he killed you?”

“I don’t even know if he was going to,” Abigail argues.

“No, you don’t,” Hannibal agrees.

“You’re the one who called the house,” she says then. “You talked to my dad before…what did you say to him?”

Will is surprised she decided to mention it after all.

“A simple conversation,” Hannibal lies with ease, “ascertaining if he was home for an interview. Then why not tell the truth?”

“The FBI thinks the man who called the house was a serial killer,” Abigail says. “Just like my dad.”

Will remembers mentioning that fact in passing to Beverly, who must have told Jack about it. So if Abigail knew…

“Jack Crawford went to see you?” Will asks.

“He came to the hospital shortly after Doctor Bloom left,” she nods. “He had a lot of questions.”

“Anything about Nick Boyle?”

“I told him he attacked us and ran,” she says. “I don’t know if he bought it.” She sits down on one of the armchairs, sighing.

“It’s fine, Abigail,” Will says. “No one will find out about what happened if the three of us don’t say anything.”

“We’ll keep your secret,” Hannibal reassures her.

“And I’ll keep yours,” she says, hesitant but sincere.

Hannibal smiles and nods.

“We’ll drive you back to the hospital,” Will says, walking to the door. “No more climbing walls, Abigail.”

“Sorry,” she says, following him. Hannibal walks behind them and locks the doors. She glances at the festive decorations of the waiting room and remembers what the date is. “Merry Christmas, by the way.”

“Merry Christmas,” Will and Hannibal reply in unison.

“I hope I didn’t ruin your night,” she says, looking at the ground as they walk toward the car.

“No,” Will smiles at her. “But you shouldn’t leave like that again, Abigail. It's dangerous.”

“Call me if you want to leave for a while,” Hannibal says, opening the door of the backseat. “I’ll sing you out.”

Abigail smiles at him, while Will throws him an annoyed glance the psychiatrist once again ignores. It makes Abigail laugh and she almost doesn’t notice the little girl staring at her from inside the car.

“Beth, make room for Abigail,” Will tells her. “We have to drive her back to the hospital,” he explains.

“Ah, sorry!” Beth apologizes, scooting to the other side of the car to free up space.

“Thank you,” Abigail tells her and gets inside. Hannibal closes the door for her.

“I’m glad that you’re okay,” Beth says to Abigail once the car is moving.

“Sorry?” Abigail asks, confused.

“I went to visit you with my dad when you were asleep at the hospital,” she explains. “I read you a story.”

“Oh, sorry,” Abigail says. “I don’t remember.”

“That’s okay,” Beth says. “Dad said you might not.”

“You get along really well with him, don’t you?”

Beth’s face lights up. “Yes,” she replies. “He’s an amazing dad.”

Abigail mirrors her smile and then looks at Hannibal and Will, who are too immersed in their discussion about wine to listen to the girls talking to each other.

“They make a cute couple,” she comments.

“Doctor Lecter and dad?” Beth asks. The teenager nods. “Yes, they do. Elijah and I think the same.”

They remain in comfortable silence for a while, before Beth speaks again.

“Why are you scared of telling them?” she asks.

Abigail’s jaw hangs open, completely taken off guard. “What?” she manages to ask, heart beating fast in her chest.

“There’s something you’re scared of telling them,” the kid repeats softly. “Whatever it is, I’m sure they won’t be angry. They’ll understand.”

Abigail freaks out in silence for a minute, trying to figure out if she accidentally said something that gave her away, but she can't think of anything. After a moment, she remembers being told about Will's empathy disorder and deduces that Beth might have the same gift.

"You really think so?" she finally dares to ask.

"Of course," Beth nods. Her phone chimes and she reads the notification before speaking again. "Dad," she calls. "El says he'll spend the night at his friend's house, and they'll drive him to Wolf Trap tomorrow morning."

"Okay, love, thanks," Will replies, before resuming his conversation with Hannibal. "Sorry, what were you saying?"

"I was saying that I plan to host a small gathering for New Year's Eve," Hannibal tells him. "There's an annual opera charity concert on that day, and we'll meet at my home after it," he explains. "You should come."

"To dinner or the opera?" Will asks.

"Both," Hannibal answers. "Of course, your children are invited to dinner, but I'm afraid I only have one extra ticket for the opera."

"You were expecting me to accept?" Will asks, smiling.

"Will you?" Hannibal smiles back.

"Yes," he decides after a moment. "I don't have any idea of what it's appropriate for me to wear, though."

"I'll help you choose what to buy, if you want," Hannibal suggests.

"Elijah has a swimming competition in Baltimore on the 28th," Will remembers. "Does that work?"

"Yes, it's perfect," Hannibal nods.

"Okay," Will nods as well. And because he's feeling brave, he adds, "It's a date."

He can see Hannibal's lips curving up from the corner of his eye.

"Yes, it's a date."

Chapter End Notes

Hope you liked the chapter <3 Thank you for reading!

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal ends up attending Elijah's competition as well. He looks so out of place with his three-piece suit, sitting on the benches of the grandstand full of cheering friends and family, coaches, and other competitors. He's making small talk with Isabela as they wait for Elijah's turn. The rest of the BAU team is still working on their latest case (Will fears he's going to get a call to help soon), so they couldn't attend. Will was assigned by them the duty of filming Elijah to show it to them later.

"You swim?" He hears Isabela ask Hannibal.

"Yes, I enjoy it," he replies, "but I don't compete."

Will curses internally at his imagination for vividly conjuring up an image of Hannibal in swimming trunks, dripping wet as he pushes himself out of the pool. He coughs and turns to Beth to ask her something about school to distract himself.

Elijah wins first place, beating his opponent by a difference of mere milliseconds. Beth and Isabela almost go hoarse from all the screaming and cheering. When the teenager exits the dressing rooms, he quickly comes to hug them all and thank them for the support, then he throws an arm around his girlfriend's waist and leaves to celebrate with the rest of his friends.

"Be careful on the way to Adela's house" Will says to Beth when they leave the stadium.

"Yes, dad, don't worry," she says. Will can tell she's making an effort not to roll her eyes at him. "I've taken the bus there multiple times, I'll be fine."

"Remember to text me when you arrive."

"Will do," she sighs. "Bye dad, see you later."

"Goodbye," Will says, and Hannibal and he are left alone in the parking lot. "So, where are you taking me today, Doctor Lecter?" Will asks, smiling.

"One of my personal favorite boutiques must be open by now," he says while checking his wristwatch. "And then I'll invite you to lunch for indulging me," he adds.

Will chuckles, not surprised. "Lead the way."

Will follows Hannibal's Bentley to a brick-walled store, full of mannequins dressed in suits on display. The first thought that crosses Will's mind is how expensive they must definitely be. He is nervous about walking inside, which Hannibal picks up on immediately.

"You're not very fond of shopping for clothes," he states.

"No," Will confirms. "Always gave me anxiety, since I was a kid."

"Why is that?"

“I’m not sure,” he says, “having too many eyes on me makes me uncomfortable.”

“Well, you’re in luck as there doesn’t seem to be any clients today. You don’t have to worry about the store owner, he’s an acquaintance of mine,” Hannibal tells him as he opens the door for him.

“You have many acquaintances,” Will comments, walking in.

Hannibal chuckles lowly. “I do have a big social circle, yes.”

“Doctor Lecter!” the owner approaches them with a smile. “What can I do for you and your friend?”

“Good morning, Mister Rossi,” Hannibal says. “We’re looking for a suit for him.”

“Did you have anything in mind?”

“It’s for the opera this weekend, so I was thinking of a tuxedo.”

Will puts on his best fake smile to disguise the distress he feels as Mister Rossi eyes him up and down.

“Yes, I think I might have the perfect one for you,” the man squints, examining Will. “How do you feel about burgundy?” he asks, walking towards the back of the store.

Will blinks, and looks at Hannibal for help.

“A deep wine-like color, like dried blood” Hannibal explains, amused. “I think it’ll suit him well,” he tells the owner.

Will hopes he isn’t blushing.

Mister Rossi shows them a tuxedo jacket and pants in that color, and offers Will a white shirt to try them on. When he does, he can’t believe the reflection in the mirror is himself. The jacket hugs his figure nicely, and the black of the lapels and buttons contrast nicely with the white of the shirt and burgundy of the suit itself. He looks good, attractive even.

Apparently, he isn’t the only one that thinks so because he can swear Hannibal’s pupils expand when Will draws back the curtains of the fitting room. He’s at a loss for words for a moment.

“Handsome.” Mister Rossi says. “Very handsome. Don’t you think so, Doctor?”

Hannibal swallows. “Yes, handsome indeed,” he agrees. He steps closer to Will, looking at his hair. “May I?”

Will nods and Hannibal draws his fingers through Will’s hair, pushing the curls out of his face, styling it as best as he can with just his hands. Will melts to the touch, holding his breath without even noticing. He can smell Hannibal’s expensive cologne from how close his neck is, and see the subtle movement of his Adam’s apple as he swallows.

He wants to bite him.

…That’s not a very appropriate thought to have in public.

He closes his eyes until he doesn't feel Hannibal's hands on him anymore, just to be safe. He's greeted by his beaming smile when he opens them.

"You look very handsome, Will," Hannibal says. "Do you like it?"

Will looks at himself in the mirror again. With the way Hannibal styled his hair he looks even better than before. His cheeks are a bit red, no doubt by Hannibal's proximity and unwavering gaze on him.

"Yes," he decides. Especially if the suit makes Hannibal look at him *like that* .

"Great," Hannibal smiles.

When Will changes back to his original outfit and walks out, carefully holding the tuxedo, he sees the store owner handing a card back to Hannibal, who then looks at him.

"Ah, I'll take that and put it in a bag for you now, sir," Mister Rossi says.

Will lets him grab it and walks towards Hannibal.

"Hannibal, you didn't have to pay for it," Will complains.

"I wanted to," Hannibal says with a smile. "I'm the one that invited you to the opera, it's only fair to get you the appropriate attire to attend."

Will sighs, but doesn't complain further. In all honesty, he wouldn't at all waste money in an overly expensive suit.

"How shall I repay you?" he asks anyway. He doesn't like feeling indebted.

"I have a few ideas," Hannibal smiles at him, flirty.

Will blinks, wondering if he's imagining the innuendo. He clears his throat and looks away, thankful for the return of the owner with his bag. They exit the store.

"What's our next stop?" Will asks, fearing being dragged to a fancy restaurant.

"It's lunchtime, I think I promised to invite you," Hannibal says, checking the time.

"You're being too nice to me," Will says, narrowing his eyes at the older man.

"Do you feel like you're not deserving of it?" Hannibal asks, tilting his head slightly to one side.

"Don't psychoanalyze me, Doctor Lecter," Will complains. "I'll let you invite me to lunch."

Hannibal smiles at him. "Of course. We can leave the cars here and walk, it's pretty close by."

The restaurant Hannibal guided them to is less luxurious looking than Will expected. It's small and cozy, and the price range of the menu isn't out of Will's budget. He doesn't feel that bad letting Hannibal order and pay for them both. It surprises him even more that what Hannibal chose for them are simple pulled pork sandwiches with provolone cheese, arugula, and onions, with some secret sauce that Will immediately falls in love with.

He giggles at Hannibal eating their meal with knife and fork while he uses his hands as any rational human being would. The fact that Hannibal doesn't comment on his rudeness for laughing at him makes Will realize that Hannibal is not paying attention to him, but rather keeping an eye on the window with a view of the street. Normally he would be offended by a date (is this a date?) ignoring him but this situation is different. The associations come to him as fast as lightning.

"Who are you planning to kill?" he asks.

Hannibal's lips curl up. "Clever boy," he says, then calmly brings a bite to his mouth and swallows, without further comment.

"You need food for your new year's eve dinner party," Will shrugs.

"Indeed," Hannibal confirms. "I hoped you would take my offer to hunt together."

"What did this person do?"

"His name is Louis Hunter," Hannibal says. "He works at a bank nearby, always walks the same way home, sometimes grabs a coffee to go from the cafe next to this restaurant," he adds.

Will keeps eating in silence, giving time to Hannibal to tell him the story he knows it's coming.

"As to what he did…" Hannibal takes a sip of wine. "I frequent the opera and socialize with Baltimore's high society quite often. As such, I have many acquaintances. One of them is Madame Beaulieu, a patron of the arts and organizer of multiple charity events in museums. She's very loved and respected by everyone," he explains, "which is why I find it appalling that a nobody like Louis Hunter would bump into her as we exit the restaurant, drop his hot coffee on her, and then proceed to not apologize, instead cursing her and blaming her for the incident for being "slow" and "in the way", with no regard for her clear motor difficulties and age."

Will hums, chewing as he takes in Hannibal's words. Normally, he wouldn't kill someone for a simple act of rudeness like that one, but he forces himself to empathize with Hannibal and put himself in the shoes of the old woman in that situation. He still thinks that killing Louis Hunter might be a bit of an overreaction but he really wants to kill with Hannibal again and, deep down, he knows he's come too far to pretend to need a moral reason to kill. He doesn't have to hide his desire to kill, not from Hannibal.

"Do you want my help?" Will asks, knowing that's exactly what Hannibal wishes for.

The psychiatrist smiles. "I was afraid you were going to reject the offer," he admits, "that my motivations to kill him might not be good enough for you."

Will shrugs. "They're not, but my disapproval won't deter you from killing him, and I enjoy killing with you. I rather not miss the opportunity."

His answer seems to satisfy Hannibal and he proceeds to explain his plan to Will. It's pretty simple: wait for Louis Hunter to leave work and walk past the restaurant, then subtly follow him home and ring the bell of his apartment. If he opens the door, they knock him out and walk inside to finish the job. If he doesn't, they pick the lock. Will doesn't waste time asking him if there are any security cameras or similar stuff they should worry about because he trusts that Hannibal has all of that figured out already.

A part of his plan he doesn't expect, yet shouldn't surprise him, is the way Hannibal alters their appearances just enough to not bring unnecessary attention to themselves but still look different enough to not be recognized if there are any surprise witnesses. Because of that, Hannibal hands Will a black baseball cap and a jean jacket to match, while Hannibal puts on fake glasses that make him look like a scholar, and grabs a pile of papers to tuck between his arm and body and pretend they're files.

After all that, as they're following their victim from a safe distance, Hannibal takes a cigarette box out of his pocket and takes one out, then grabs a lighter.

"I didn't know you smoked," Will says.

"I don't," Hannibal says, "I find the smell and the health effects atrocious, and because of that, it serves our cover."

Will hums, trying not to seem too allured by the sight of Hannibal holding the cigarette between his long fingers, and his lips parting just enough to let the tip of it inside of his mouth and take a puff. He doesn't cough or anything similar, which Will thinks means that, despite his dislike of it, he might smoke occasionally while he does stalking activities like this one.

Their victim reaches his home and they both stop walking. Will grabs Hannibal's arm and pretends to look for something on his phone while Hannibal looks at Louis Hunter opening his door with feigned disinterest. Once he's done, they wait a few minutes before walking to the door of the building. It's one of those doors that open with a magnetic charm, and Will isn't surprised that Hannibal has one. The door opens and they walk inside, going straight for the elevator. When they reach the corresponding floor, they walk down the hall and stop in front of the apartment.

"Ready?" Hannibal asks.

"Yes," Will nods.

Hannibal rings the bell. And they wait.

Louis Hunter doesn't come to the door.

"Shall I do the honors?" Will asks.

"Please," Hannibal smiles.

Will picks the lock. The lights inside are on, but there's no movement, and the only sound is the noise the water makes as it hits the tiles of the shower. Their victim is in the bathroom. Hannibal and Will exchange a look. Both are experienced killers and know how attacking victims while they're in the shower makes everything easier. Not only do they usually have nothing at hand to defend themselves with, but also the clean-up afterward is easier.

Silently, they discard their shoes and change into the murder plastic suits, then approach the bathroom door, hoping it won't squick and alert the owner of an intruder. It doesn't. The silhouette of their victim is visible through the frosted glass door of the shower, and he's humming a tune absentmindedly.

"Ready?" Will mouths at Hannibal without producing any sound. He nods.

They attack.

Will slides the glass door open and Hannibal lunges, wrapping an arm around Mr. Hunter's neck and covering his mouth with his hand. Will watches in awe as the man struggles to escape Hannibal's grip and fails miserably.

He turns the shower off before stepping inside. Louis lets out a muffled scream when he sees the knife in Will's hand. They lock eyes, and Will gains sadistic pleasure from the fear he sees there. The adrenaline is rushing through his veins and he craves to make the man bleed, to see Hannibal stained with his blood.

"Hold his head steady for me," Will requests.

Hannibal blinks, surprised, but does as he asks. "I thought you would want me to do it," he confesses. "That you wouldn't kill him, only participate." Louis Hunter screams again, but neither of them pays it no mind.

"I thought so too," Will admits then licks his lips. "But I've changed my mind."

Hannibal grins, more than pleased with the outcome.

"I can't damage any organs, right?" Will asks.

"I'm afraid so," Hannibal replies.

"His neck will have to suffice, then."

Louis whimpers and tries to move away but Hannibal doesn't let him. His nostrils flare desperately as Will steps closer, holding the knife, and with his eyes fixed on his neck. Will places a hand on top of it, feeling the quickened pulse of Louis under his fingers. He then quickly nicks the skin and blood rushes out of the wound in a small quantity. He's sure that the cut is so shallow that Louis can't even feel it, but he screams anyway. For a second, Will entertains the idea of licking the blood of the wound with his tongue before feeling disgusted with himself. He's not a vampire.

He shakes his head and makes another nick of the skin, a bit bigger this time. He delights, taking in the strong metallic aroma that quickly fills the room. He observes the two wounds and decides that he's ready to cut deeper. Without warning, he cuts the entire front of his neck with strength, making a deep cut that oozes blood immediately. The arterial spray causes Will's entire plastic suit to be stained with blood, and some of it falls on Hannibal as well, including a rebel drop that falls on his cheek.

Louis Hunter drops to the ground between them but they don't even look at it, both murderers are too hypnotized by each other's eyes. Hannibal's eyes are more pupil than iris and Will swears he can hear the echo that his rushing heart makes against his ribcage, as if it were trying to escape.

Will can't resist his impulses anymore.

Will grabs Hannibal by the neck and brings their mouths together, not caring about the blood on his gloves, or the dead body lying on the floor between them. Hannibal is surprised at first but is quick to kiss back when he understands what's happening. He bites Will's lower lip softly, evoking a moan from the younger man.

Will decides that the distance between them is too much, so he breaks the kiss and slides closer, thankful for the plastic suit Hannibal bought him that prevents his legs from being covered in blood. He sits on Hannibal's lap and kisses him again, open-mouthed and hungry. Hannibal's hands grab his waist with enough strength to bruise it, which only turns Will on more.

"Will," Hannibal says between kisses.

Will hums but keeps kissing him.

"Will," he repeats. He tilts his head back, trying to escape the other man's mouth. Will decides to kiss his chin and neck instead. "Will, I'm not complaining about this—"

"Then shut up," Will interrupts.

"—but we have to leave soon," Hannibal continues. "Louis Hunter's wife could arrive any time."

Will sighs, and stops kissing him. They look at each other for a couple of seconds, before he curls up an eyebrow.

"Are you going to let go of me then?" Will asks, looking at Hannibal's hands that are still on his waist.

"Oh, sorry," Hannibal replies, embarrassed.

Will chuckles and gets up from his lap, uselessly wiping his gloved hands on his equally dirty pants. Then he offers a hand to Hannibal and helps him get up as well.

"Sorry," Will says, blushing. "I shouldn't have kissed you without permission."

"Don't apologize," Hannibal says. "I wanted to kiss you as well."

They smile at each other, then Will clears his throat and turns to look at the corpse.

"So, what should we do with this?" he asks, motioning in the general direction of it.

"We dismember him," Hannibal says bluntly. "Do you think you can do that?"

"I can," Will nods. "It's not that difficult to avoid empathizing with dead people."

"Can you assume my point of view by looking at the result of what I did?" he asks as he looks for the appropriate tools for their task in his bag.

"That's what I do at crime scenes," Will says.

"You empathize with the killer rather than the victim so you won't feel their pain," Hannibal continues. "But empathizing with their killers damages your sense of self."

"Not only the killers, anyone I empathize with." Will grabs a medical tool he doesn't recognize that Hannibal hands him, and examines it as he continues speaking. "Every person I empathize with makes it difficult for me to differentiate their thoughts from my own, as you pointed out when we first met. It's getting worse lately, but it's useful sometimes."

"You can use their killings as inspiration for your own?" Hannibal asks.

“Yes,” Will replies. “Hey, what’s this?”

“A Gigli saw,” Hannibal explains, holding one in his hand as well. “It’s used to amputate limbs.”

“Ah. I thought we’ll use some type of mechanical saw.”

“We will, for the torso.” Hannibal kneels on the floor and extends the steel wire of the saw on top of the corpse’s leg. “Shall I teach you?”

“Please,” Will nods, kneeling next to him.

Hannibal shows him what to do, and Will can easily reproduce the process on the man’s arms on his own. He is later tasked with placing everything inside plastic trash bags and then into an empty travel bag, which they steal from the house. If someone were to see them leave, they’ll assume they were going on a trip somewhere, and it won’t be as suspicious as carrying around plastic trash bags until they reach their cars. While Will makes sure everything is packed, Hannibal takes care of the torso, separating it into very neat pieces.

“I’ll pack these, you take care of the blood?” Hannibal proposes.

“You’ve been doing this for years, you know how to clean up a crime scene as well as I do yet you task me to clean up every time,” Will complains but accepts the proposal anyway and takes the supplies from Hannibal’s bag. “How old were you?”

“When I killed my first?” Hannibal finishes the question. Will nods. “Thirteen,” he replies.

Oh, that's young.

“You?” Hannibal asks back.

“Seventeen,” he says. “Who did you kill?”

“A misogynistic butcher that was racist to my aunt,” he answers. “Quid pro quo?”

“The P.E. teacher at our school,” he says, and feels the anger filling his body as he remembers his motive. “He manipulated some of my classmates to have sex with him or he would fail them.”

“How did you do it?”

“I was stupid and young then,” Will says. “I intended it to be premeditated murder, but it ended up being self-defense. I seduced him so he would take me to his house, but he didn’t. He kissed me in the car and put his hand between my legs, so I stabbed him.” Will shudders at the memory and Hannibal’s face darkens. “I cut his cock off while he was still alive after.”

That eases Hannibal’s expression and makes him laugh. “What did you do with the body?”

“Nothing, I left it there,” he says. “Foolish, I know, but by some kind of miracle, I was never caught.”

“You were luckier than me, then,” Hannibal says. “The police were sure I killed the butcher, but I passed a lie detector test and they reluctantly let me go.”

“Lie detector tests are easy to fool once you detect the control questions,” Will says. “Or if you can remain calm for the entirety of it, which I assume you did.” He gets up, satisfied with his cleaning.

Hannibal smirks.

“Are we ready to leave?” Will asks.

“Yes, everything is packed,” Hannibal says.

They exit to the garden and hide in the middle of some bushes to take off their murder suits and straighten their clothes before beginning to walk in their car’s direction. There are some people on the streets, but no one pays particular attention to them. They load the bags in Hannibal’s car and close the trunk.

“I’d love to invite you to spend the night at my house, but I have patients early tomorrow,” Hannibal starts.

“And I have to pick up the kids, yes,” Will finishes, lightly blushing.

Hannibal licks his lips, pensive. “I’ll spend my afternoon making preparations for new year’s eve dinner,” he says, “but I’ll be mostly free overmorrow.”

Will blinks at the use of the archaic word. “Would you like to come have lunch at my house?” he asks. It only seems appropriate to pay Hannibal back for all the times he’s fed him. “Do you like fish?”

Hannibal smiles. “I do.”

“Great, I’ll make us lunch then.”

“Shall we invite Abigail?” Hannibal asks as if he’s thinking out loud. “I haven’t had the opportunity to visit her at the new facility yet.”

Will considers it. “Sure, why not?” he decides. “The more comfortable she is with us, the more she’ll tell us.”

“Perfect,” Hannibal says. “I’ll pick her up.”

“Okay,” Will nods, and looks away, unsure of how to say goodbye after what happened in Louis Hunter’s house.

Hannibal huffs a laugh and takes the initiative to softly kiss his lips. Will knows that the memory of their shared kisses and Hannibal’s hands wet with blood will follow him to the privacy of his room later that night.

Will takes Elijah ice fishing on the lake near the house on the morning of the 30th. Beth runs around and plays with the dogs in the snow. The morning goes by fast, but they're lucky enough to secure six beautiful fish that will be enough to feed the five of them.

Hannibal texts him to let him know he already picked up Abigail and is taking her shopping for clothes before going to Will's house. They arrive when lunch is almost finished cooking and Beth runs to open the door. The dogs surround Hannibal's car, barking and wagging their tails.

"Behave, everyone!" Beth orders them. "Come here, sit, sit!"

"Hello, Beth," Hannibal says when he gets out of the car, observing the dogs as they follow Beth's commands. "You have very well-trained dogs."

"Hello, Doctor Lecter," Beth says with a smile. "Dad trains them," she announces proudly. Abigail gets out of the car as well. "Hi, Abigail," Beth adds.

"Hey," the teenager greets her with a shy smile.

"Hurry inside, it's freezing here," Beth says, hugging her torso. "The food is almost ready."

"Beth, I told you to put on your jacket!" Will's scolding voice comes from the kitchen.

The girl simply giggles. The dogs all sniff the newcomers enthusiastically and Abigail gets down to the floor to pet them, even letting Ellie lick her face.

"She likes you," Beth comments.

"I love dogs," Abigail admits. "We never had one because my mom was allergic."

"You can come visit them anytime you want," Will says, having walked out of the kitchen at some point.

"Hello, Will," Hannibal says.

"Hi. You can sit in the dining room if you want, lunch will be ready soon."

"Anything I can help with?" Hannibal offers.

"Nah, Elijah and I have it covered." He notices the box Hannibal's holding. "What's that?"

"I made some samples of the dessert options for tomorrow's dinner," he explains. "I was hoping you could help me decide."

"Dessert!" Beth exclaims happily. "What is it?"

"You'll have to wait until we finish lunch to find out," Will says, grabbing the box from Hannibal's hands to take it to the kitchen. "She has a bit of a sweet tooth," Will explains when they reach it.

"'A bit' is an understatement," Elijah says.

Hannibal chuckles. “Good to see you, Elijah.” The young man is adding rosemary to the pan, to add flavor to the sauce, Hannibal notices.

“You too,” he says, then looks at Abigail. “You must be Abigail.”

“Yes,” she nods. “And you are?”

“Elijah Graham,” he says, offering her his hand to shake.

When the food is done, they move to the dining room and Will serves the fish. Hannibal compliments the flavor, which makes Will smile, feeling proud of both his catch and Elijah’s job in the kitchen.

“Someone came to visit me, the other day,” Abigail comments while they eat. “A red-headed woman,” she continues and Will and Hannibal exchange a look.

“Freddie Lounds went to see you?” Will asks, alarmed. “What did you tell her?”

“Not much, why?” She frowns.

“Miss Lounds is a journalist,” Hannibal says.

“What she does isn’t journalism,” Will argues. “It’s rumors and sensationalism.”

“She said she wanted to tell my story, my truth,” Abigail says. “Write a book.”

“What did you tell her?” Hannibal asks.

“That I would think about it,” the teenager replies. “You think it is a bad idea?”

Will looks at Hannibal before answering. “It’s your decision, Abigail, but you can’t control what comes out once you open the door.”

“She wants me to write about you in the book,” she confesses.

Will rolls his eyes. Of course she does.

“We’ve been through a traumatic event, no one more traumatized than you, Abigail, but we went through it together,” Hannibal says. “What you write, you write about all of us.”

“You would be forfeiting your privacy,” Will says, “and ours.”

“My privacy’s already been forfeited,” Abigail says.

“You’re important to us, Abigail,” Will continues. “I can’t help feeling some responsibility for you.”

“Just because you killed my dad doesn’t mean you get to be him,” Abigail says.

Will visibly flinches, at a loss for words. Hannibal is about to speak but backtracks when he sees Abigail’s guilt clear on her face.

“I’m sorry,” she apologizes quickly, dropping the cutlery she was holding. “I didn’t mean that.”

“I know I’m not your dad, Abigail,” Will tells her, calmly. “But I hope I— *we* , can be a source of support for you,” he says. “A paddle.”

“You don’t need our permission, nor our approval,” Hannibal continues. “But I hope it will mean something to you.”

“Freddie Lounds is dangerous,” Will adds.

Abigail’s defiance softens under their persuasion.

“I know what people think I did,” she says. “They’re wrong. Why can’t I tell everybody that they’re wrong?”

“You have *nothing* to apologize for,” Will tells her. “You’re a victim.”

Abigail purses her lips, deep in thinking. She doesn’t speak again for the remainder of their lunch.

“This is amazing, Hannibal, you have to serve this one!” Beth says after taking a spoonful of the semisweet chocolate mousse with blueberries and raspberries Hannibal brought.

Hannibal smiles at her, not minding the use of his first name.

“Does this have dulce de leche?” Elijah asks after taking a bite of the other kind of sample: mini toffee apple pies.

“It does,” Hannibal answers, surprised at the ingredient being recognized, as well as happy about it. “Have you tried it before?”

“My girlfriend’s family is from Argentina,” he explains. “I fell in love with it when I tried it. These are amazing, Doctor Lecter.”

“Maybe it was a bad idea to make us choose,” says Will after trying the mini apple pies and having been given a spoonful of mousse by Beth. “Both are fantastic.”

“Perhaps the guests could choose?” Abigail suggests. “Offer both in case someone doesn’t like apple pie?”

“You don’t like apples?” Hannibal asks.

The teenager blushes, caught. “I do like them, but not cooked.”

Hannibal hums, considering Abigail’s idea. “It’s a good suggestion,” he decides. “I’ll do that, then.”

“Yay!” Beth celebrates. Abigail smiles.

Later, after spending some time with Will’s kids, Abigail walks to the kitchen, where Hannibal and Will are still conversing, drinking some wine.

“Abigail,” Will says when he sees her. “Can I offer you something? Water?”

“No, I…” She licks her lips, nervously. “I need to tell you something.” She closes the door.

Will leans against the counter and puts his glass down next to Hannibal's.

"What is it?" he asks, trying to sound calm.

"Whatever it is, Abigail, you have nothing to be afraid of," Hannibal reassures her. "You can tell us anything."

"It's about the case," she starts, not meeting their eyes. Then, after a long pause, she whispers, "I helped him."

"What?" Will frowns. He didn't hear her.

"I helped him," she repeats, louder this time, and raising her head. She's crying. "I knew what my father was. I knew what he did. I knew," she continues, walking anxiously from one side of the room to the other. "I was the one who met the girls, talked to them, laughed and joked, found out where they lived, where they were going, when they'd be alone." She stops and looks up. "Girls who looked like me. They could have been my friends." A sob escapes her and she hides her face in her hands. "I couldn't tell him no. I- I knew it was them or me."

Will doesn't know who moves first, Hannibal or him, but they're soon both next to Abigail. Will lets his paternal instincts tell him what to do and he hugs her, pressing her head close to his chest. Hannibal places a supporting hand on the teenager's back, rubbing it slowly in circular motions while Will strokes her hair.

"I wondered when you would tell us," Hannibal says when she's calmed down a little.

Will can't see her face, still hidden on his chest, but he knows she must be surprised because it takes her a couple of seconds to react.

"How long have you known?" she asks.

"We always suspected," Will replies gently.

"I'm a monster," Abigail says, and a new sob escapes her.

"No," Will and Hannibal say, firmly, at the same time.

"I know what monsters are, Abigail," Will continues, "and you aren't one."

"You are a victim," Hannibal adds. "And we'll protect you."

"You will?" she says in a broken voice.

It breaks Will's heart.

"Of course," he says and has to resist the urge to give a kiss on her head. She's not Beth, he doesn't know how she'll react. "Would you like some soothing tea?" he offers instead.

The teenager finally lets go of him and rubs her nose. Her eyes are puffy from crying, and there are black smudges from her mascara all around them. Will is glad he isn't wearing a white shirt.

"Yes, thank you," she accepts. She tucks her hair behind her ears and avoids the men's eyes.

“Beth has makeup wipes and mascara in the bathroom, if you need them,” Will says. He knows the girl would like to have an excuse to leave the room.

“Oh, yes, thank you,” she smiles slightly. “Excuse me.”

She leaves the kitchen, closing the door behind her and leaving both men alone.

“We were right,” Will says while he fills the kettle with water. “Can’t say I’m too happy about it.”

“I’m glad she told us the truth,” Hannibal says.

“But you still think she’s hiding something?” Will can read it on his face. He puts the kettle on the stove and turns it on.

“She feels guilty about what happened to the girls, what her father did,” Hannibal says. He crosses his arms and leans against the counter. “But she also feels guilty because of how good she felt while killing Nick Boyle, guilty about how easy it was for her to lie about it.”

“She’s not a psychopath,” Will says. “Of course she’d feel guilty.”

“Did you?” Hannibal asks. “Did you feel guilty when you killed your P.E. teacher?”

“He was a bad person, so I didn’t,” Will replies. “I was more scared about being caught.” He frowns. “You think Abigail feels the same way?” is more of a statement than a question. “But Nick Boyle wasn’t a bad person.”

“He wasn’t, but he represented a threat to her at that moment,” Hannibal says.

Will thinks over his analysis but is distracted by the water boiling. He turns the stove off and pours the hot water into a cup with a teabag. He ignores Hannibal’s disapproving look.

Right on time, Abigail returns to the kitchen. She washed her face, cleaned it with makeup wipes, and reapplied her mascara. She also has glitter on her eyelids.

“Beth insisted on it,” she explains when she notices his gaze.

Will laughs. “Beth is obsessed with glitter at the moment,” he explains. “It looks good on you.”

The teenager smiles and takes a sip of the tea.

“I think I’ll reject Freddie Lounds’ offer,” she declares.

“I think that’s for the best,” Hannibal says.

“Let the public think whatever they want,” Will says. “We’ll protect you and prove you had nothing to do with your father’s crimes.”

“What if they find something?” Abigail asks.

“They haven’t already, so they won’t,” Will says.

“And if they do,” Hannibal says, “we’ll take care of it.”

Abigail believes them. She smiles.

Elijah and Beth tease Will all the way to Baltimore for wearing the fancy suit Hannibal got him. They only stop when they reach the doctor's house. Hannibal's smile when he eyes him up and down not so subtly makes everything better. He knows the man appreciates that Will styled his hair as Hannibal had in the fitting room.

"Ready to go?" Will asks him.

"Yes," Hannibal nods. "The table is set already, and Abigail has instructions for what to do in the kitchen," he tells Elijah and Beth. "Make sure the dogs stay in the backyard."

Surprisingly, Hannibal had agreed to allow Will's dogs to spend New Year's Eve at his house since the fireworks would likely scare them, and he likes to be with them when that happens.

Elijah and Beth guide the dogs inside the house, promptly joined by a smiling Abigail, wearing a blue dress Hannibal got her yesterday. Hannibal and Will supervise the whole process and once the dogs are all settled in the backyard, they walk to Hannibal's Bently to drive to the opera. Will hopes Max doesn't chew any of the plants.

Will borrows some of Hannibal's charisma and confidence, and he manages to survive the socializing before the show and during the intermission. Hannibal introduces him to all of the guests that will be attending dinner later that evening, and Will pays special attention to not forgetting anyone's name.

"You can't imagine how euphoric I was when I received the invitation," Mrs. Komeda is telling them. "It's been so long since you last cooked for us."

"I was waiting for inspiration to strike," Hannibal says, then makes a show of looking at Will. "It struck."

Will's face feels on fire.

"Aw, aren't you two lovely," she says.

She wants to keep conversing with them, probable gossip about who Will is and what he does for a living, but she's interrupted by two men that approach the group.

"I believe this young man is trying to get your attention," Mrs. Komeda says, looking at the shorter one of them.

Hannibal turns, putting on a fake smile Will has learned to identify by now, and shakes the man's hand.

"Hello."

“Hi, so good to see you,” the man says, then points to his companion. “This is my friend, Tobias.”

The taller man shakes Hannibal’s hand as well, and the way he looks at him turns on alarms in Will’s brain. There’s a darkness about him, not as penetrating and suffocating as Hannibal’s, but stronger than most dangerous people he has encountered, and the desire Will reads in his eyes when he looks at Hannibal doesn’t help his case either.

Will unconsciously strengthens his grip on Hannibal’s arm.

“And you are…?” the shorter man asks Will.

“Will Graham,” he says, shaking his hand. “I’m his partner,” he adds.

It’s probably a stupid thing to say when they only have shared a few kisses, touches, and flirty words, with no discussion about the nature of their relationship. However, Hannibal smiles, sincerely this time, so Will swallows his doubt. The short man’s happy expression crumbles for a second, just enough for Will to notice.

“How do you two know each other?” Mrs. Komeda asks.

One of his patients, Will deduces.

“There should remain some mystery about my life outside of the opera,” Hannibal answers.

“I’m one of his patients,” he says.

Hannibal turns the subject back to the opera to avoid any awkwardness that revelation might bring.

“Did you enjoy the performance?” he asks, looking at Tobias, but his patient is the one that replies.

“I loved it,” he says. “Every minute.”

“His eyes kept wandering,” Tobias adds. “More interested in you than what was happening on stage.”

“Oh, don’t say too much,” Hannibal says. “You must leave something for us to discuss next week.” He turns to the shorter man. “Franklyn, good to see you.”

Hannibal and Will exchange handshakes with the two men before walking away. The intermission ends soon enough and Will has no opportunity to speak with Hannibal about his suspicions about Tobias.

When Hannibal and Will arrive from the opera, they find that Alana is in the house already. Hannibal rushes to the kitchen to add the finishing touches to their dinner, not without offering her beer first. Will asks if there's anything he can help with, but Hannibal kindly rejects him, so he decides to check on the dogs in the backyard. Alana follows him.

"You two are getting along nicely," she says.

"Yes," Will agrees. "Who would have thought?"

Will is happy to see the dogs haven't chewed any of Hannibal's plants. Alana doesn't say anything else, but Will knows that she has questions. He avoids using his empathy to find out exactly what they are, but he can imagine.

The dinner goes well and Will surprises himself by socializing with Hannibal's guests instead of keeping quiet and eating his food. It goes without incident, except when he choked from trying not to laugh when Hannibal made his speech before commencing the meal and said "nothing here is vegetarian".

After toasting with champagne to celebrate the arrival of the new year, Will and Beth run outside to distract the dogs while fireworks are being fired in the distance. Luckily, most of them stay pretty calm, except for Zoe, who refuses to get down from Will's lap. Will has to get up, with her still in his arms, to prevent his pants from getting completely soaked by the snow.

"Bring her inside," Hannibal tells him from the door when he sees him.

"You sure?" Will asks, surprised.

"As long as she stays in your arms," he nods.

Will smiles, carrying Zoe inside and thanking Beth, who stays outside with the rest of the dogs for a while. Inside, Hannibal is saying goodnight to the guests that have to leave, most excusing themselves to go visit other friends or family. Elijah and Abigail are talking in the hallway.

"Will," the boy calls him. "Can I ask you something?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"Do you think I could take Abigail to hang out with my friends at the Harbor?" Elijah asks. Abigail is shyly smiling next to him. "It'd only be for a while, we'll be back in an hour or so."

"What 's going on?" Hannibal asks, joining Will's side.

"I wanted to know if it's okay for Abigail to come to Harbor with my friends and me," Elijah repeats.

"As long as you stay safe, I don't see why not," Hannibal replies. "No?" he looks at Will.

He considers it for a minute. Abigail deserves to have some fun after what she went through.

"Okay," he accepts. "Don't accept drinks from strangers, and take care of each other."

"Call if something happens, no matter the hour."

Abigail nods while Elijah rolls his eyes,

“Thank you,” the girl smiles at them.

The only guests left are Mr. and Mrs. Komeda, who are chatting with Alana and Beth about ballet, while Hannibal and Will take care of the dishes in the kitchen. Will thinks it is a good time to talk to Hannibal about the man they met at the opera.

“Is something on your mind, Will?” Hannibal asks as if reading his mind.

“I was thinking about your patient’s friend from the opera,” Will admits.

“Ah, Tobias. What about him?”

“Did you notice anything… odd about him?” Will wonders.

“Odd?” Hannibal frowns. “Like what?”

Had he imagined it? Will doesn’t think so.

“There was something weird about the way he looked at you,” Will explains. “As if he knew…why are you looking at me like that?”

Hannibal has a huge smirk on his lips, and Will realizes what he’s going to tell him next.

“Are you jealous, Will?” he asks, getting closer.

Will rolls his eyes. “Hannibal…”

“You did grip my arm harder when he approached us,” he continues teasing him, placing a hand on Will’s waist.

“I’m serious,” Will complains but doesn’t move away. “It was as if he knew something about you, about your true nature.”

“I know what you mean,” Hannibal finally turns serious. “He did strike me as suspicious, but there’s no reason to think he knows of my hobbies. I’m very careful.”

“I know you are,” Will says, shaking his head. “It’s not that, it’s like…” he tries to find the right words. “He had the eyes of a killer, and it’s like he recognized the same thing in you when he met your gaze.”

“I sensed the same thing about him,” Hannibal admits.

“Do you think he’ll cause you trouble?”

“We’ll have to wait and see,” Hannibal says. “What do you see when you empathize with him?”

“Not much,” Will says. “He is definitely a killer, but not the kind that does what you do, or what I do. He hasn’t found the right canvas for his art yet.” he continues. “Still, be careful. He might be a threat.”

“You don’t have to worry about me, Will. I’ll be fine.”

Will wants to tell him that he can't be sure of that, but Mr. and Mrs. Komeda walk into the kitchen.

"Thank you for the lovely evening and amazing food, Hannibal," Mrs. Komeda says, walking closer. "But I'm afraid we must take our leave now."

"Our children are visiting us for lunch tomorrow," Mr. Komeda explains.

"Thank you both so much for attending," Hannibal tells them.

He shakes Mr. Komeda's hand and kisses Mr.s Komeda's. Will mimics him, feeling a bit awkward.

"It was a pleasure to meet you, Will," Mrs. Komeda says. "I hope we get an occasion to talk again soon."

The only guest left when the old couple leave is Alana, who Hannibal offers one of the guest rooms on the second floor to spend the night, which she accepts, offering them help with the remaining dishes in exchange. The three proceed to work in peaceful silence.

"Goodnight, dad." A sleepy Beth, already in her pajamas, walks into the kitchen.

"Goodnight, love," Will says to her, bending down to kiss her forehead. "Remember to brush your teeth."

The girl hums, then yawns.

"Good night, Hannibal," she says. "Good night, Alana."

"Goodnight, Beth," both of them reply.

"There are extra blankets in the closet of your room, in case you need extra warmth," Hannibal reminds her.

"Thank you," the girl says. She hugs her father shortly and then leaves to go upstairs.

"You're staying the night, Will?" Alana asks.

"Yes," he replies.

"The drive back to Wolf Trap is long," Hannibal explains, "and it's not safe to do so after drinking."

"I didn't drink that much," Will complains, but he is smiling.

"Will the dogs be okay spending the entire night in the laundry room?" Hannibal asks. He had allowed Will to leave them there to protect them from the snowfall.

"They're well trained," Will replies. "I'll have to let them out early tomorrow, but they'll be okay for the night."

The bell rings and Will wonders if Mr. and Mrs. Komeda forgot something, but it's Elijah and Abigail who've come back already. Will didn't notice that an hour had already passed.

The teenagers greet them and quickly excuse themselves to the guest bedrooms on the ground floor. When all of the dishes have been washed and are set to dry, Hannibal shows Alana to her room, while Will finishes his last glass of wine of the night in the kitchen.

“I’m glad you enjoyed the wine,” Hannibal tells him, amused, when he returns.

“I mostly drink whisky these days,” Will says, taking one last sip, “but you might convert me.”

Will doesn’t want to know how much a bottle of it costs, though.

Hannibal chuckles. “You might drink as much as you like when you come to visit,” he says and grabs the empty bottle from the counter, “but I think you’ve had enough for the day.”

Will does feel a bit lightheaded, and he has a headache, but those are so persistent lately that he has learned to ignore them. Aspirins are no longer enough to keep them at bay. Maybe he really needs to visit a neurologist, like Hannibal keeps suggesting. He’ll tell him to make an appointment with his friend soon.

“Shall we go to sleep?” Hannibal asks him. “I’m afraid all of my guest rooms are in use, but I don’t mind having company on my own.”

Will smiles. “Trying to get me to bed with you, Doctor Lecter?” he teases.

Hannibal returns the smile. “Is it working?”

He walks closer and places his hands on Will’s waist. He lets him.

“The suit looks as if it was made exclusively with you in mind,” Hannibal says, eyeing him from bottom to top. “I had to make an effort to not stare at you in awe for the entire evening.”

Will rolls his eyes, but he’s aware that the heat he feels on his cheeks must betray him.

“I’m serious,” Hannibal continues. “I wanted to kiss you in front of my guests.”

“Why didn’t you?” Will whispers.

“I thought you wouldn’t like it,” he replies.

Hannibal is right. Will has never been a fan of public displays of affection, it’s always made him uncomfortable, especially in front of acquaintances and friends. It exposes him too much, and he prefers to keep as much of his true self as hidden as possible.

“You can kiss me now,” he says instead.

Hannibal does, soft and sweet. His lips taste like wine, slightly different from the one Will has been drinking, but still nice. The kiss is so gentle that it irremediably makes Will think about the contrast between the violence he knows Hannibal is capable of, which leads to remembering the last kiss they shared at Louis Hunter’s house. The memory makes him moan. God, he wants to experience something like that again. Soon.

Their lips part, and Will whimpers when their tongues touch. Hannibal’s hands are now lower on his back, as Will holds him by the neck, feeling his pulse under his thumb. He wants to bite him there, leave his mark.

“Take me upstairs,” he manages to say when they pull away. “Please.”

Hannibal gives him a peck before he lets go of him completely.

“Of course,” he says, offering Will his hand.

Will takes it and they hurriedly climb the stairs. They pass in front of the closed doors of Abigail and Alana’s rooms and get to the main bedroom. Will had been in here already, but the intentions were different: it was late, they were tired, and they had a plane to catch the next morning. Now they don’t have any of those problems. They can do whatever they want, and there’s nothing that Will wants more at the time than to have Hannibal naked and panting on top of him.

Chapter End Notes

I finished editing to post in time, yay! Sorry for the cliffhanger, please don't kill me. Especially because I'm going on a trip next week and I'm not sure if I'll be able to post on Saturday. I apologize in advance. You can read some of my other works if you're in need of smut.

I hope you enjoyed the chapter! <3

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

I managed to get the chapter finished on time! It's smut time :)

UPDATE: There's also art as well now! You can check the original tweet here !! Please send much love to the wonderful artist <3

I hope you enjoy!

Apparently, Hannibal also wants to have Will naked and panting soon. Once they are inside the room, Hannibal pulls Will by his tie and kisses his mouth as he unties it slowly, with a patience that Will lacks. His head is spinning, and his heart beats fast when Hannibal throws the tie to the floor and moves to kiss his neck, teasingly teething at the skin but not biting, not claiming Will just yet.

Will bites his lip hard, trying to stop himself from whimpering. He struggles to discard his own coat before doing the same to Hannibal's, letting them fall to the ground and trying not to think about how expensive they are. He slips his hands past the hem of this shirt and finally, finally, he's touching the skin he's been fantasizing about since he saw him shirtless for the first time. He caresses his chest, curling his fingers in the hair he finds there and lightly pinching his nipples, making Hannibal groan.

Hannibal kisses him and Will gets distracted, letting his hands rest against his sides.

Hannibal guides him over to the bed without breaking the kiss. "Lie down," he orders when they arrive.

Will obeys and Hannibal crawls on top of him, straddling his lap.

He kisses Will once more, and then his hands are unbuttoning Will's shirt, pulling it off and throwing it carelessly somewhere into the darkness of the room. Will watches in awe as Hannibal's hands move underneath his shirt, stroking the skin of his bare stomach and sending shivers down his spine. He then caresses Will's top surgery scars with such a fond expression in his eyes that it makes Will's heart melt, especially when he deposits a kiss on top of both of them. It's almost magical how beautiful Hannibal looks at that moment. He wants to consume him.

Will runs his hands through Hannibal’s hair as Hannibal leans forward to suck one of his nipples, which quickly hardens. Will arches his back and moans loudly when Hannibal bites the sensitive bud.

He can't help it; everything feels so good right now, and he's not sure if it'll ever stop. He's never experienced anything so sensual before. It's mind-blowing. When Hannibal licks and nibbles his way along his chest and down his stomach, following the line of hair leading to his underwear, he feels lightheaded and weak, heart beating in anticipation of what's to come.

"Hannibal," he begs, not sure why.

"Mhm?" Hannibal hums as he opens Will's fly, resting one hand on his abdomen.

"Please," Will whines.

"Please what?" Hannibal asks, playing with the elastic of his underwear.

"I need you inside me," Will says, "your fingers, your tongue, your cock, whatever, just please, get inside of me," he demands.

"Your wish is my command," Hannibal says.

Will would've laughed if the words would've been said by someone else, but coming from Hannibal they sound real, like the complete truth. He believes he can ask Hannibal to do anything at the moment and the man would do it without questions or preambles.

Hannibal removes his pants slowly, taking them off with care as if not to damage the fabric, but Will suspects he just wants to drive him crazy with desire.

"Hurry up," Will complains, making the older man laugh.

"Eager, are we, love?" Hannibal tells him.

Still, he dips his fingers between Will's legs and cups him through the cotton, making him moan. Will readily stretches his thighs open to allow Hannibal unhindered access. He's so wet already and Hannibal can smell his scent in the air, sweet and mesmerizing. He wants to eat him. He wants to make Will feel good, to make him never stop craving him.

After a few more minutes of teasing him through his boxers, lightly playing with his cock, he removed that last piece of fabric as well, leaving Will completely naked under him. Hannibal takes a moment to admire the view, Will's toned torso, meaty legs spread open, long neck with purpling bruises, and beautiful blue eyes looking straight at him. Hannibal kisses him chastely.

"You're beautiful, Will," he tells him as he slides a finger between the labia that makes Will scream. "So beautiful." He kisses his neck.

"Please," Will begs, panting and rolling his hips into Hannibal's hand, trying to get his finger inside of him, but Hannibal retrieves it instead.

"Not yet darling," he says. Will groans.

Instead, he lowers on the bed and kisses the inner side of his thigh, then bites the soft skin to leave a mark. Will gasps and instinctively closes his legs, trapping Hannibal's head between his thighs.

"Sorry!" Will apologizes, embarrassed, but Hannibal holds his thighs in place before he can spread them open again.

"It's perfectly fine, dear Will," Hannibal says, breathing hot air against Will's cunt. Will tries not to shudder at the sensation, even as he feels his whole body go tense.

"Fuck!" he yells, "I need you— I need your mouth."

He hears Hannibal chuckle. “As you wish,” he murmurs against his skin before kissing the area surrounding the entrance to his hole. He licks up his slit, delighting in Will’s taste, and circles his cock, applying pressure. He massages his thighs as he keeps suctioning it, making Will’s already blood-filled cock more swollen with pleasure. Will’s fingers knit into his hair, enjoying the feeling of having Hannibal’s tongue exactly where he wanted it to be.

His tongue moves rhythmically between Will’s folds, forcing a loud moan out of Will that makes his back arch. He doesn’t know how much longer he can last before he explodes. Hannibal doesn’t seem to care, though, because he decides to push a finger inside of him while still sucking at his cock.

Will lets out an involuntary whimper and clings onto Hannibal’s head, his legs hugging him even closer against him. He clenches around the finger and grabs the sheets beneath him, trying his best to not come yet.

“More,” he pleads anyway. “More.”

Hannibal obeys, pushing a second finger inside. He stops sucking him and gives his inner thigh a final kiss before forcing Will’s legs open to free himself. He scissors his fingers inside Will’s tight heat, making Will gasp and grip the sheets harder. Hannibal kisses him and Will tastes himself on his tongue, and holy shit, he’ll die if Hannibal doesn’t get inside of him soon. And the man still has his pants on, for fuck’s sake!

“Off,” Will requests, patting his legs. “Take this off,” he demands.

“Of course, my love.” Hannibal takes his fingers off him to obey and Will whines at the loss, making him chuckle. He kisses the tip of his nose as he unbuckles his belt. “I’m sorry, Will, I can’t take them off if my fingers are otherwise preoccupied,” he says.

Will whines and decides that he’s not patient enough to wait for him, and Hannibal is blessed with the sight of Will Graham with a hand between his thighs, fingering himself open with three fingers and rubbing his dick with his thumb, moaning in pleasure. The snarl that escapes Hannibal’s throat is almost animalistic in nature.

Hannibal rids off his underwear quickly and Will moans even louder at the sight of Hannibal’s bare cock, hard and dripping precum. Will’s mouth waters at the sight. He wants to feel it inside his mouth, but he’ll have to leave that for a future occasion.

“Look at you,” Hannibal says, smiling fondly, “getting yourself ready for me.” Hannibal gets off the bed and retrieves a condom from the bedside drawer. “Do you require any extra lubrication, my dear? Anything at all?”

“No, no,” Will shakes his head, “I just need you to fuck me already, please.”

Hannibal kisses his forehead. “As you wish.”

He slides the condom over his length so slowly that Will has to repress the urge of doing it for him. Once it’s on, Hannibal jerks his cock a few times before sliding it between Will’s folds, making the two of them moan.

“Please, please, please, please,” Will begs, his nails sinking on Hannibal’s hips, encouraging him to get closer, to cease his teasing and get inside of him.

Finally, finally, Hannibal eases forward, sinking past the wet rim of his entrance with ease. Will lets out a breathless whimper, squeezing his eyes shut and biting his bottom lip so hard he draws blood. Hannibal leans over to kiss him, licking the blood off him and moaning around its taste, as if it were the sweetest ambrosia served only to the Gods.

Will moans, his hips moving uncontrollably to meet Hannibal's thrusts. His hands move to his ass, trying to push him inside impossibly deeper. Then Hannibal's hand resumes the stimulation of his cock and his whole body convulses.

"Oh, God," he gasps," faster, Hannibal, please— God."

Hannibal does as asked, speeding up with each thrust, fucking into him faster, making Will cry out and the bed creak. Will's cunt squeezes around his retreating length every time, sending shivers down Hannibal's spine. They both know they're not going to last much longer.

"Come for me, my love," Hannibal commands, thrusting harder and applying just the right amount of pleasure to Will's cock. "Come."

Will does, his orgasm ripping through with extreme force, making him shake from head to toe. His cries fill the room along with the sound of flesh slapping together and his legs tremble, squeezing Hannibal and trapping him inside of him. Hannibal moans loudly at the intense sensations and keeps fucking Will through his orgasm until he comes as well, filling the condom with his semen.

He collapses on top of Will with a satisfied sigh.

They lie there for a few minutes afterward, both breathing heavily, hearts racing. They don't want to move, but Hannibal has to get out of Will to discard the condom soon to not risk any leakage, and Will whines when he feels Hannibal get off him.

"I'm sorry, love," Hannibal says, kissing his forehead. "I'll throw this away and be back soon," he promises.

Hannibal leaves the bed and disappears to the bathroom for a few minutes before returning with a towel to clean Will. He leaves kisses all over his skin as he cleans him up, then throws the towel to the floor to get in bed with him as soon as possible. Will holds him close, burying his face in his chest and breathing him in.

"That was…amazing," he whispers, tired.

"Indeed it was," Hannibal agrees as his fingers caress Will's nape. "You were more vocal than I imagined," he teases.

"Oh God," Will hides his face from him, embarrassed. "I hope no one heard us."

"All of my walls are soundproof, you have nothing to worry about," Hannibal reassures him.

"So guests don't find out what secrets you keep in your basement?"

"And in my room," Hannibal winks even when Will can't see him.

Will laughs. "God, where did I find a partner as amazing as you?" he asks.

Partner. The word tastes sweet on his tongue. It feels right.

“I could ask you the same question, mon amour,” Hannibal whispers. Will yawns. “Go to sleep, my love.”

And so Will does.

He dreams of the stag, which has become a usual occurrence by now. This time, however, he finds himself riding the stag’s back as they slowly move through a dark, foggy forest. All of the time Will feels that there’s something wrong as if something or someone is watching their every move, but the fog doesn’t allow him to see.

Suddenly, a ferret jumps from behind a tree and right in front of them. Both them and the ferret stay still, looking at each other for a few seconds, then the stag begins chasing it, taking Will with him.

Will gets an opportunity to ride Hannibal when he wakes up in the morning, which earns him more beautiful marks on his hips he sadly has to hide from the rest of the world.

They shower and dress up (Hannibal wears a turtle neck to hide the bites that adorn his neck), and by the time they head to the kitchen it's already 9 am, but no one else seems to have woken up yet. Hannibal prepares them coffee and some simple food and Will waits seated at the breakfast table, with his laptop in front of him. Beverly sent him all the files from the Lost Boys case early yesterday morning, and he hasn't had the opportunity to check them yet. He wants to make a presentation on it for his students when classes resume next week.

Beth is the first one to get up, complaining about wanting to sleep more but not managing to and being lured to the kitchen by the amazing smells coming from it. Will offers her a place on his lap and the girl happily takes it, eyeing her phone screen.

"You seem happy, dad," Beth comments out of nowhere while Hannibal is serving their coffees. "Did something good happen?"

"I am happy," Will confirms, ignoring the second part of her question.

"You seem happy too, Hannibal," she says.

"I am happy as well," he too replies.

She looks between them, back and forth, but in the end, doesn't say anything further. Luckily for him, Will's conversations with her about not poking at people for answers with clues she gets from her have bared fruit.

Abigail and Elijah join them shortly after, talking enthusiastically about the fireworks they watched last night. They settle on the remaining two empty seats at the breakfast table, and although Will is certain that Hannibal finds it rude for the teenagers to not have asked before sitting and leaving no place for him, Hannibal doesn't say anything. Instead, he keeps himself busy in the kitchen, preparing even more scrambled eggs and bacon.

When Alana joins them, embarrassed about being the last one to wake, she has to pause at the door, surprised by what the first thought that comes to her mind when she sees the scene in front of her eyes.

Family, that's what she thought. That's what the scene reminded her of. Hannibal, cooking for everyone, with Elijah beside him, discussing something about spices and ingredients. Beth is telling Abigail a funny story about the dogs while seated on her father's lap, who is ignoring everyone else and silently working on his laptop while occasionally taking a sip of his cup of coffee that Hannibal keeps refilling.

But what catches her attention the most is the brimming smile on Abigail's face. She looks so different from the few times she's seen her at the hospital. She laughs and talks as if she was a completely different girl from the one she met. Alana can tell she feels safe and at ease with Hannibal and Will. Her psychiatrist side warns her about Abigail growing codependent on them, but she can't deny how much better Abigail looks when she is with them.

"Good morning, Alana," Hannibal notices her presence and the spell is broken.

"Good morning," she says with a smile, walking towards them.

Hannibal serves her breakfast, which she thanks him for, and eats in silence, observing how Abigail interacts with everyone else while Alana thinks. Abigail seems a bit more careful with her words and expressions now that she's aware of her presence, and barriers back up. Alana can't help feeling a bit sad at Abigail's carefulness around her, but she knows the mistrust is expected with the kind of trauma she went through, especially since it involved the adults that were supposed to protect her. They're lucky enough that she's managed to open up to Hannibal and Will already, she can't press her to open up to her as well.

Still, she can't shake the uneasiness. She feels off.

"Can we talk about something for a second?" Alana asks, looking at Hannibal and Will when she's done eating. Will blinks and frowns in confusion, while Hannibal simply tilts his head in interest. "In private," she adds.

They exchange eye contact for a second before Hannibal speaks. "Yes, of course," he says. "Please, follow me."

"Beth, please." Will pats the girl on the sides of her legs.

Beth gets up, letting her dad consequently get up as well. He almost falls, just now realizing that his legs hurt from holding Beth's weight for a while. Hannibal reacts quickly, holding him still with an arm around his waist.

"Thank you, sorry," Will says, embarrassed. "I forget Beth is not a little girl anymore sometimes."

Hannibal guides the three of them to his study and closes the door behind them. The room is small but has sufficient space for full bookcases, a desk with a computer, a chair, and a round glass table holding different kinds of liquor and glasses.

"So," Hannibal begins, "what did you want to talk about?"

Strangely in sync, Hannibal and Will lean against the desk and look at Alana, waiting for her to speak. She's amazed at how intimidating they look, and she wonders if Will is unconsciously mirroring Hannibal's mannerisms with his empathy. Even when wearing a simple green turtleneck sweater and pants, so different from the perfectly tailored three-piece suits she always sees him in, he is equally imposing.

Alana licks her lips before speaking. "It's about Abigail," she finally starts, "I don't know how healthy it is for her to spend so much time with you both."

"What do you mean?" Will asks, instantly growing defensive.

"Don't misunderstand me," Alana says. "I know she talks more, smiles more, lets her guard down when she is with you," she continues, "but I'm scared that she might be projecting on you the image she had in her mind of her own dad, and repressing her trauma that way."

"We're nothing like her father," Hannibal says. Will does his best not to laugh, clearing his throat as a cover.

"I know that," Alana says. "I just don't think it's healthy to foster that kind of codependency. She had a relationship like that with her father, and it didn't end well." Then she adds, "plus, we don't know how far involved she was in her father's crimes."

"She wasn't involved," Will quickly argues. "There's no proof, and Jack has questioned her already. We questioned her already."

"Just like there was no proof about Elijah?" Alana asks. Hannibal can see on her face she immediately regrets it.

Will is filled with an intense rage that makes his whole body tremble. He starts looking around the room for possible weapons to calm himself down. Killing Alana is not a good idea, at least not at the moment, but imagining it helps him not to explode.

"Elijah was not involved in his parents' disappearance," he says as calmly as he can. "He was interrogated more times than a frightened thirteenth-year-old should have, he passed all the tests. He has nightmares till this day about it, Alana."

"I'm sorry," she apologizes. "But you have to understand where my concern comes from. You have a history of losing your objectivity in cases involving children."

"I'm not having this conversation," Will decides.

Hannibal places a hand on his shoulder. "Will."

"Sorry, I can't." He shakes the hand off. "How can you insinuate that Elijah killed his parents?"

Alana goes pale. "That's not what I said."

"Really? Because to me that's exactly what it sounded like."

"Will," Hannibal repeats, this time grabbing both of his shoulders and turning him so they're facing each other.

"I'll leave," Alana says after a few moments of silence.

"I think that's for the best," Hannibal agrees. "Sorry, Alana, I'll take what you said into consideration. Thank you for your company."

Alana nods and leaves the room as fast as she can, not bothering to close the door. She excuses herself to the kids saying she has to go greet some family members for the new year and runs to her car. She'll have to apologize to Will about comparing Abigail's situation to Elijah's at some later date. And probably to Hannibal too.

"What happened to Elijah's parents?" Hannibal asks Will upstairs. He remembers Will telling him he rescued the boy when they first talked about him.

"He killed them," Will replies in a whisper. "I found him having a panic attack by the side of the road in the middle of the night, covered in blood. He was only thirteen then, and he had a good motive, I couldn't leave him alone."

"You helped him deal with it as we did with Abigail," Hannibal deduces.

"Yes," Will nods. "It was a similar situation as well, violence that started as self-defense. His…" He pauses to take a deep breath. "His parents were extremely religious, and not happy at all when they found out he was in a chat group for transgender kids."

"They attacked him?" Hannibal asks, drawing soothing circles with his fingers on Will's back.

"His dad had a gun at home, he pointed it at Elijah trying to get him to leave the house," he explains. "Elijah tried to take it and they fought for it, but it fired and pierced his mother's chest."

Will can see the scene in his mind as clearly as if he had been there the moment it happened. The reconstruction of that particular crime is hard to erase from memory, even after all the reconstructions he's done since.

"His father started yelling at him: 'look what you did, look what you did. You took my daughter away from me, now you had to take my wife too?'" Will continues. "Elijah couldn't handle it, torn between shock, grief, and anger. He attacked on instinct."

"He shot his father," Hannibal says.

"Until he emptied the chamber," Will confirms. Hannibal offers him a glass of water. "Thank you." He chugs it before continuing. "I was with Beth when we found him, driving back home from ballet lessons in Baltimore. She was only eleven then, but she remained calm and stayed with him in the car while I went to the house to clean everything up and when I got back to the car, hours later, they were asleep. I thanked all the deities I could think of for keeping them safe and drove them home."

"We made a plan, and I went to Alana, asking for help since she worked with social workers sometimes and she would know what to do. We told her I found Elijah crying on the way back home, that his parents had kicked him out because of his identity, and it was late at night so I brought him home." Will rolls his eyes. "It wasn't that far from the truth, and she believed it easily. However…"

"When the police realized his parents were missing she grew suspicious?" Hannibal asks.

"Yes," Will replies. "She wasn't the only one, but the police didn't find anything, and by that time Elijah had won my friends' trust already." He shakes his head. "Beverly is still resentful towards Alana till this day for not trusting Elijah."

"You are, as well," Hannibal says, and Will glares at him. "You wanted to kill her a mere few moments ago, I could smell it on you."

Will huffs. "Smell it on me?"

"I have an acute sense of smell."

"What does 'I want to kill my friend' smell like?"

"Feverish sweet," Hannibal says. "Is she your friend?"

"She's useful." Will shrugs. "And the kids, especially Beth, like her. I can't kill her."

"And yet your intense desire to do so is all I can smell," Hannibal says as he gets closer, looking him in the eye. Will notices his widened pupils. "You'll have to do something about that, it wouldn't be healthy to repress it."

"And you would never want me to repress it, right doctor?" Will teases.

"Never," Hannibal confirms, smiling at him.

“You want me to find a substitute to kill?” Will asks with a growing smile. “You showed me yours so now I have to show you mine?” He raises an eyebrow.

“I would like to witness how you kill, yes,” Hannibal says.

Will smiles. He closes his eyes and searches for the room in his mind palace that holds the files and pictures of people that, according to him, don’t deserve to live. He finds one he thinks is suitable in a couple of minutes.

“How do you imagine I kill?” he asks in a whisper.

“I fear my imaginations will pale in front of the real thing.”

“Entertain me.”

“I’m afraid I must insist.”

Will licks his lips. “Well okay, but not today,” he decides. “I promised the kids we would spend some time together.”

Hannibal can’t fight against that. “What’s the plan?”

“Beth and Elijah want to ice skate,” Will says. “And I think I heard Abigail saying she’d love to join in, so I’ll invite her as well. There’s a frozen lake near my house.”

“You know how to ice skate?” Hannibal asks.

“My activities in the lake usually limit to ice fishing, but I do know how to, yes.”

Hannibal hums, thinking about his options. “I hope you have an extra pair of skates, then.”

“You’re joining us?” Will looks at him with surprise. “I don’t remember inviting you,” he adds teasingly.

“I hope you don’t mind me imposing.”

“Let’s see what the kids say,” Will decides.

They go back to the kitchen, where the three of them are still chatting, barely noticing their return.

“I’ll go get the dogs,” Will tells Hannibal. “Make sure there’s nothing chewable around.”

Hannibal sighs and scans the rooms that stand between the laundry room and the foyer of the house.

“Are we leaving?” Elijah asks, narrowing his eyes at him.

“Yes, your father told me you wanted to go ice skating,” he replies. He moves a plant from a low shelf to one higher up, in case one of the taller dogs can reach it.

“Can Abigail come?” Beth asks excitedly.

“Yes, she can,” Hannibal confirms. “If she wants to, of course.”

The teenager blushes. “I’d like that,” she says. “It’s been years since I last skated but…” she trails off.

“It’s okay, we can teach you if you don’t remember,” Beth says, smiling. “You’ll come to?” She asks Hannibal.

“If you don’t mind,” he replies.

“Of course not,” she says. “It’ll be fun!”

They drive to the Graham’s residence to drop the dogs off and grab everything needed to enjoy the cold weather before driving to the frozen lake. There are a lot of people when they arrive, mostly families with young kids, and there’s pop music playing from the ice skate rental booth close to it. Hannibal pays for his pair and Abigail’s.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Will asks Hannibal as they both put them on, seated on a wooden bench. Beth has already left, having spotted some of her classmates in the middle of the lake. Elijah, on the other side of the bench, is helping Abigail tie her laces. “You might ruin the expensive imported fabric of your clothes if you fall.”

“Then I’ll simply not fall,” Hannibal replies.

“Do you know how to skate?”

“I’m hoping you could teach me.”

“You’ll have better luck asking Elijah or Beth,” Will says, getting up. “I’m not as good as them.”

Elijah loudly laughs next to them. “That’s true,” he says, “I saw him fall more times than I can remember.”

Will rolls his eyes. “Here’s some advice,” he says to Hannibal, offering him a hand to help him stand up. “Don’t have kids, they only exist to expose you like this,” he jokes.

“You love me,” Elijah grins.

“Unfortunately,” Will says.

Abigail laughs, then shyly turns to Hannibal.

“I can teach you how to skate,” she says, not looking him in the eye. “If you want,” she quickly adds.

Will’s heart melts, and it reminds him of the tasteless conversation with Alana earlier. He can’t see the codependency Alana accused them of fostering, only trust, and the hope that comes from finding someone that can protect you.

“How can I refuse such a kind offer?” Hannibal tells her and Abigail smiles, lightly blushing.

Will watches them from the side of the lake as Abigail gives him instructions. He isn’t surprised when Hannibal learns fast, although a bit disappointed to not be able to witness his inelegant fall. Beth is still with her classmates, and Elijah has found some of his friends as well.

He’s so focused on watching them that he doesn’t realize someone has approached him until they speak.

“He is a very good-looking man,” the familiar voice of Mrs. Scott tells him. “Is he the reason why I’ve been taking care of your dogs so often lately?”

Will pulls his scarf higher to hide his face. “I’m sorry for the trouble,” he replies.

“Oh, it’s not trouble at all, dear,” she says, placing a hand on his back. “The dogs are lovely. It’s a great company to have when my grandkids aren’t around.” She pauses before adding, “I’m glad you found a partner, he looks like a good man.”

Will licks his lips not to laugh. If only she knew. “He is,” he says instead.

“You should join them,” Mrs. Scott suggests. “You young people should enjoy yourselves before it’s too late,” she adds, sounding a bit melancholic. Will opens his mouth to say something, but she interrupts him. “Don’t worry about me, dear, I’m perfectly well looking at my grandkids from here on my own. Go spend time with them.”

Will takes her advice in the end and skates toward Abigail and Hannibal.

“Go have fun,” he tells her, “I’ll make sure the old man doesn’t fall,” he jokes.

Abigail laughs and skates away, joining Beth, who is trying to make a ballet spin on the ice. When Will turns his eyes from them to Hannibal, he finds the man looking at him with an exaggerated offended expression.

"What?" Will asks, trying not to laugh.

Hours later, they arrive at the Grahams’ house, cursing when they exit the warmth of the car to the late afternoon chilly wind. Somehow, all the families at the lake ended up involved in an intense snowball fight, which resulted in everyone ending up wet and cold. Hannibal is better at disguising his agony than the kids, but Will still sees him shiver.

“Will, oh my God, hurry up,” Elijah complains while Will struggles with the keys. He has both his arms wrapped around his torso and rubbing his sides.

Will finally manages to open the front door and everyone rushes inside at the same time as the dogs run out.

“I’ll get a fire going and make hot chocolate,” Will quickly says, going straight to the hearth in the living room. “Abigail, you can take a shower and warm up in the bathroom if you’d like, it’s right next to the kitchen,” he tells her.

She looks at the shivering Elijah in question.

“Don’t worry, I’ll use the upstairs one,” he says, then looks at Beth. “Unless you want to shower first,” he offers.

“I’m fine, you go,” she replies.

“You don’t happen to have extra clothes with you, right Abigail?” Will asks. The girl shakes her head. “Okay, leave them outside your door once you’ve stripped. I’ll set them to dry.”

“Thank you,” she says.

“You’re welcome.”

Beth opens the door and calls the dog back inside once the fire is on. She settles with them in front of the fire, looking pensive. Will wants to speak with her, but he has a more pressing matter at hand.

“I’ll help you with the chocolate,” Hannibal tells him, following him to the kitchen.

“No, you will not,” Will replies firmly. “You go rest by the fire with Beth and the dogs. Don’t think I haven’t noticed you shaking, Hannibal, you’ve looked uncomfortable from the first moment a snowball touched you.”

Hannibal pauses his step, surprised that Will has noticed, briefly at a loss for words.

“Please go, I promise I won’t burn the kitchen down,” Will jokes, trying to lighten the sudden somber mood. “And put Abigail’s clothes to dry in front of the fire as well, please.”

Hannibal stands at the kitchen entrance for a while, and Will thinks that he’s going to insist on helping him, but in the end, he behaves and leaves. Will smiles, and mentally adds the cold to a new list titled “Hannibal’s weaknesses”.

By the time the chocolate is ready, the teenagers have exited the bathrooms already, and Elijah helps Will carry the cups to the sofa in front of the fire. He would have liked to have his hands free to take a picture of Winston lying on the sofa, with his head resting on Hannibal’s lap and getting his head petted by him. Instead, he shoos the dog off to make space and returns to the kitchen to grab his cup of coffee and bring a tray of cookies for them to eat.

“Sad we don’t have marshmallows,” Elijah murmurs.

“But we have the cookies you baked and they’re amazing,” Beth says, stealing one from the plate.

“You baked these yourself?” Hannibal asks.

“Yes, sir,” he replies, proud.

“Mm, they’re good,” Abigail praises after taking a bite. She looks smaller than she is since she is provisorily wearing one of Elijah’s sweaters and sweatpants. He might be younger, but he is at least a head taller than her.

“Thank you,” Elijah smiles. “What do you think?” he asks Hannibal then.

“The flavor and texture are great,” he says and takes another bite. “Might be a bit too sweet for my taste, but it’s well accomplished.”

Elijah seems content with the honest reply.

“Is something wrong with the chocolate, Beth?” Will asks the girl, who’s looking straight to the fire, clearly lost in her thoughts, holding the cup close to her mouth but not drinking.

“Sorry,” she says and rubs her eyes. “I got lost a bit.”

Will knows what she means. The same thing used to happen to him when he was younger. Still does these days, if he has to be honest, but is more unusual and easier to control at will. He can go inside his mind, fish in the quiet of the stream while trying to hide from all the evil minds, as Jack Crawford would call them, he’s empathized with.

“Who did you empathize with?” Will asks her, brushing one lock of hair behind her ear.

“A girl from the cheerleading team at school,” she replies, then takes a sip of chocolate and makes a face. “She doesn’t get along with her mother, she forces her into diets,” she explains.

“You’re having trouble eating because of it,” Will deduces. He grabs her hand. “Remember what we talked about?”

“Yes,” the girl nods then follows the grounding technique her father taught her.

It’s the 5-4-3-2-1, which is usually used for anxiety, but there are not many people like Will or Beth can do to prevent their empathy disorder from interfering with their everyday life, and grounding techniques can at least make the situation easier to handle.

“Did you teach her that?” Hannibal asks him later as they wash the dishes.

“Yes,” Will replies. “Why, do you have any suggestions, doctor?”

“I think in general grounding techniques could be useful for the empathy disorder you both possess, there’s not enough research about it to be certain what works and what doesn’t,” he says. “It’s more a trial and error situation. Has she ever gone to therapy?”

“She doesn’t like the one at her school,” Will says. “And she never expressed wanting to go to one.”

“Maybe you accidentally passed your aversion to psychologists and psychiatrists to her,” Hannibal half-jokes.

“Maybe.” Will shrugs. “Now, you should go take a shower and change clothes before taking Abigail back to the hospital,” he changes the subject.

“Are you going to lend me clothes?” Hannibal asks.

“What, are you telling me the always-ready serial killer doesn’t keep a change of clothes in his car just in case?”

Hannibal smiles. “Our relationship is so young but you know me so well already.”

Will’s heart skips a bit at the out-loud acknowledgment of their status and clears his throat before speaking again, pretty sure that he has a stupid smile on his lips.

“Didn’t they warn you? I can read minds,” he says. “I’m going to uncover all your murdery dirty secrets.”

Hannibal chuckles externally but feels a pang of worry inside. A small part of him is always worrying that all of this may be a trap by Will and the FBI, while another part of him screams that it’s an illogical concern. Will has had plenty of opportunities to betray him, and he never did.

“Give me the Bently’s key and go to the upstairs bathroom, I’ll bring you the clothes,” the man demands, bringing him back to the real world.

Will opens the trunk and finds the extra change of clothes in the duffel bag Hannibal always seems to take everywhere he goes. He brings them inside, the difference between temperatures making the inside of the house feel warmer, and he goes upstairs. Once there, he knocks two times on the bathroom door and calls Hannibal’s name.

He is about to call for him again when the door snaps open and a hand grabs him by the shirt, yanking him inside.

"Hannibal!" he complains. "What are you do-" he gets cut off by a kiss and a push against the door.

He feels Hannibal’s wet hands on his neck, sending shivers down his spine, but he doesn’t move, responding to the kiss and letting Hannibal bite his lower lip as much as he wants. He only breaks it when Hannibal’s hands move to his ass.

“Hannibal, the kids are downstairs,” he says, “and you have to take Abigail back to the hospital soon, or they’ll call to scold us.”

“I can be quick,” Hannibal says, pouting.

It makes Will laugh. “No,” he insists.

“Shower with me?”

“No,” Will repeats.

He doesn’t trust Hannibal to keep his hands to himself. Nor himself to keep his hands off Hannibal, really.

“I promise we’ll meet again soon and then we can shower together,” Will says, freeing himself from Hannibal’s grasp. “But not now.”

He can’t believe he managed to make Hannibal, the Chesapeake Ripper, pout.

After Hannibal and Abigail leave, Will and the kids have some light dinner consisting mostly of leftovers. He showers afterward and retires to his bedroom for the evening, exhausted. Beth falls asleep almost immediately after putting her head on the pillow but, on the other side of the wall, Elijah stays awake for a while longer, talking on the phone with a friend.

At around 2 a.m. he gets up from his bed to pee but almost has a heart attack when he opens his bedroom door and finds Will standing there, staring at him with dead eyes.

“WHAT THE FUCK,” he screams, jumping backward and scaring poor Heidee awake.

His heart is racing from the fright, but the speed somehow increases when he realizes that Will hasn't responded, nor moved.

"Will?" he asks, waving a hand in front of his eyes. Nothing. "Will, are you okay?"

The man still doesn't answer, but he turns around and continues walking down the hall.

"Will, stop, stop!" Elijah follows after him, scared of the man falling down the stairs. "Dad, dad!"

Will walks downstairs with no problem at all, slowly, and Elijah lets out a deep exhale, only to be scared to death again, this time by Beth putting a hand on his shoulder.

"Jesus Christ."

"Sorry," she apologizes. "What is wrong with dad?"

"He's sleepwalking, I think," Elijah says. "Has he ever done it before?"

"Not that I remember," Beth says, frowning. "Did you try to wake him up?"

"Is it okay to wake up a sleepwalker?"

"I don't know." Beth takes her phone out of the pockets of her robe. "Give me a minute, keep an eye on him."

Will is aiming for the front door and Elijah gets in his path to prevent him from leaving the house. Will stays still in front of him while Winston sniffs his hand, curious about what's going on. The dog licks his fingers, but Will still doesn't wake up.

"It's okay to wake them up, but not recommended," Beth reads from her screen. "It says here that waking them could trigger a stress response with unintended consequences for either you or the sleepwalker."

"Like what?"

"It increases activity in the amygdala," Beth continues, "which means that he will act out in a manner like a fight or flight response. He can lash out or fall, basically."

"So what do we do?" Elijah asks.

"I don't know." Beth walks towards them and frowns. "Does he have a fever?"

"Why do you ask?" Elijah frowns.

"I have a feeling he does," she says, carefully touching Will's forehead with the back of her hand. "He does," she confirms. "He's been having headaches a lot more often lately as well. Should we call a doctor?"

"Alana?"

"Let's call Hannibal," Beth decides.

"He's an hour away, Beth, Alana is closer," Elijah says, searching for the contact on his phone.

“No, let’s call Hannibal,” she insists. “Do you know dad’s phone password?”

Elijah sighs. He’s used to not questioning his sister when she is sure about something.

“No, but I can guess it,” he says. “Stay with him, I’ll go find it.”

A couple of minutes later, Elijah returns to the room with the already unlocked phone. He calls Hannibal and turns on the speaker.

“Will, what’s wrong?” the doctor answers after some tones, voice rough with sleep.

“Hi, Hannibal, it’s us,” Elijah replies.

“Elijah? What is it?” They hear the click of a lamplight being turned on in the background.

“Our dad is sleepwalking,” Beth explains quickly. “And he has a fever.”

“We didn’t want to wake him up, but we’re not sure what to do,” Elijah adds.

“Is he responsive if you speak to him?” Hannibal asks. By the shuffling sounds in the background, he’s probably getting dressed.

“No, he didn’t react when I called his name or told him to stop,” Elijah replies.

“What is he doing?”

“Just standing still right now,” Beth says.

“He wanted to get out of the house, but I’m blocking the door.”

“If there’s a sofa or a bed nearby, try to either guide him to it or bring it closer in case he wakes up and falls,” Hannibal says. “I’ll be there shortly.”

Elijah moves the sofa closer, trying not to step into any of the dogs in the process. He is glad he moved it because just a couple of minutes later Will finally wakes up, and does indeed fall backward, towards the couch, hitting his head in the process.

“Careful dad!” Beth calls. “Are you okay?”

“What—” Will starts, blinking and frowning. He looks at his two concerned kids and then at his surroundings. “Why am I here?”

“You were sleepwalking,” Elijah explains. “And you have a fever.”

“Sleepwalking?”

Elijah explains to him what happened while Beth searches for the thermometer in the bathroom to take Will’s temperature.

“What did you dream about?” She asks when she returns.

“I was walking in the forest with the dogs,” he replies. “You two should go back to bed, you have school tomorrow.”

“We’re waiting for Hannibal,” Elijah says.

“He’ll want to take you to the hospital, you look really bad, dad,” Beth adds.

“Hannibal is coming here?”

“You almost gave us a heart attack,” Elijah says, “we didn’t know what to do. I wanted to call Alana but Beth said to call him instead.”

Will sighs. Beth grabs the thermometer since enough time has passed.

“104°F,” she reads.

“It’s pretty high,” Elijah says. “I’ll bring you a cold wet towel.”

“I can take an aspirin, I’ll be fine,” Will says. He tries to get up from the sofa but the whole world around him spins, and he’s forced to lie down again.

“Just let us help you, dad, Hannibal will be here soon.”

Will wants to protest again, but the wet towel Elijah brings him feels so good that he can’t do it. He dozes off a bit and regains consciousness when the chilly air gets inside from the open door. He is not conscious enough to process their words, but he vaguely gets that Hannibal and the kids are talking about him. He yawns, and even the small movement of his jaw makes his head throb. At least, it works to get rid of his sleepiness a little.

“Hello, Will,” Hannibal tells him, kneeling on the floor next to him. He takes the towel from his forehead and submerges it back in the bowl of ice water before placing it on his head again. “Elijah and Beth tell me you have a fever.”

“I’m sorry to bother you,” Will manages to say, voice rough.

“Never apologize for calling me, much less when you’re in distress,” Hannibal says. “And the children were right to call me, for what I can smell your fever is pretty strong. It seems like you might have encephalitis.”

“You can smell encephalitis?” he asks, not even surprised at this point. “You were right about the neurology appointment then,” Will says.

“Yes, I’m sorry I didn’t arrange it for you sooner,” Hannibal says. “But I shall take you to the hospital now, the faster encephalitis is treated, the better.”

“Okay,” he accepts with a sigh.

Hannibal turns to speak to the kids. “Can you pack a change of clothes for your father? A toothbrush, as well. And bring me a pair of pants and shoes too, please.”

The kids go to the upper floor to do as instructed while Hannibal helps Will up from the couch. The man is in a shirt and his underwear, so Hannibal dresses him up with the pants Beth fetched for him, as well as the shoes, then grabs a coat from the rack next to the door.

“Can you stand up?” Hannibal asks him once that’s dealt with.

“I think so,” Will says.

He rises, slowly. He’s dizzy, but he doesn’t think he’s going to fall. He doesn’t say anything to Hannibal about it. The arm he wraps around his waist is a comforting presence in his distressed state. They walk towards the door, out of the house, and into the car, where Will is grateful that Hannibal let the heating on. Beth and Elijah join them moments later, holding three bags.

“You two should stay, you have school tomorrow,” Will says, looking at the kids through the rearview mirror.

“In five hours, actually,” Elijah corrects.

“We are not leaving you, dad,” Beth says at the same time, throwing a look at her brother. “We’re worried about you, we want to be with you.”

“You won’t get rid of us just by getting sick, old man,” Elijah says teasingly.

Hannibal turns on the engine of the car. “I’ll call their schools later to explain their absence,” he says, “I’m sure they’ll understand.”

The ride to the hospital it’s almost two hours long, and it passes mostly in silence. Will and Beth doze off, and Elijah closes his eyes, unable to sleep even if he wants to. He won’t ever admit it aloud, but the worry is eating him from the inside.

Hannibal takes care of all the bureaucratic processes. While Will is taken in for an MRI, accompanied by Beth, Hannibal spends almost thirty minutes charming one of the girls from the front desk and returns to the waiting room with a winning smile after getting her to call the neurologist he knows to arrive early. Elijah wonders if he promised to pay him double the usual charge, but doesn’t ask.

A middle-aged doctor walks hurriedly in their direction, holding a coffee cup in one hand, and Hannibal gets up from his seat to greet him.

“Thank you for coming, Donald,” he says, “I apologize for disturbing your sleep, but you must understand the urgency of the situation.”

“Of course,” Donald replies. “Encephalitis, you said?”

“That’s what I suspect, yes.”

“Is he getting an MRI done already?” Hannibal nods. “Okay, good, let’s go up,” Donald says and signals for Hannibal to follow him to the elevator. Elijah follows behind them. “The results won’t be ready for at least a couple of hours after it’s done, so we can order some other tests while we wait,” he adds, pressing the correct button on the elevator panel.

“Blood test, lumbar puncture, EEG?” Hannibal asks.

“Lumbar puncture for sure,” Donald agrees. “We’ll see about the other two.”

A yawn escapes Elijah at that moment, his body feeling the effects of being awake for 24 hours. Only then Donald seems to notice his presence.

“Is this kid yours?” he asks Hannibal.

“My partner’s,” he clarifies.

“Nice to meet you…”

“Elijah.”

“Elijah,” the neurologist repeats. “Your parent will be okay, I assure you.”

“Doctor Sutcliffe is one of the best neurologists I know,” Hannibal adds. “Your father is in excellent hands, Elijah,” he reassures him, squeezing the teenager’s shoulder.

Elijah hopes he is right.

Hannibal secures a room for Will to rest and stay in after pulling some strings. He also takes care of calling Elijah and Beth’s schools to explain their absence, while Will calls human resources to inform them about the situation and ask for sick leave. He suggests Alana as a substitute teacher, then sends a quick text to the group chat and turns off his phone before it’s flooded with get-better wishes and questions about when visiting hours are.

“Thank you for the help,” Will says, still feeling tired even after having some food. “Don’t you have any patients today?”

“I canceled them,” Hannibal replies simply. “I wanted to be here for you.”

Will wants to say something back to him, but the door opens and Doctor Sutcliff walks in with a nurse, who immediately catches his eye. There’s something weird about him, but Will isn’t sure how much he trusts his judgment at the moment after being explained what the effects of encephalitis are on cognitive abilities.

The doctor explains something regarding the antibiotics he’ll have to take, but he isn’t paying much attention. He trusts Hannibal will explain anything he wants to know later if needed. Instead, Will is observing the way Matthew behaves and the way he looks at Hannibal, which briefly reminds him of Tobias, the man they met at the opera. Hannibal speaks to Matthew in a way that lets Will know they know each other, Hannibal definitely gets all of his appointments at this hospital. Or perhaps he worked here before turning to psychiatry. He hadn’t considered that possibility. The encephalitis is affecting his deduction abilities.

"Why don't you go grab something to eat?” Hannibal suggests to the kids once Doctor Sutcliff and Matthew leave the room.

The both of them have taken naps between Will’s tests but hadn’t had an opportunity to eat yet, so it doesn’t take much more than a mention of a fast food chain restaurant nearby to convince them, and Elijah promises to return shortly as they leave them alone.

“He is very worried about you,” Hannibal tells him.

“Elijah? Yes, I know,” Will says.

“He feels indebted to you because of what you did for him in the past,” Hannibal adds.

“I know that, too,” Will sighs tiredly. “That’s why he’s always helping me when hunting. I told him a hundred times that it’s not necessary, but he doesn’t listen.”

“He might be scared that if you don’t find him useful you won’t care about him anymore,” Hannibal says.

Will frowns. “Well that’s dumb, I love the kid.”

“Our childhoods have great influence over the rest of our lives,” the psychiatrist says. “Do you know anything about his parents? Aside from what you’ve already told me.”

“Not much,” Will admits. “He avoids talking about his past whenever possible. And he refuses to speak with his school therapist too.”

“He doesn’t want to accidentally confess to what he did,” Hannibal deduces.

“That’s what I think as well,” Will says. “Maybe you should try talking to him,” he says, jokingly.

“Maybe,” Hannibal replies in a serious tone. Will yawns again. “You should sleep, Will. You’ve been awake for long enough,” he says as he checks the time. He grabs his coat. “I have an appointment with my psychiatrist today that I forgot to cancel, but I’ll be back for dinner. I’ll bring you something to eat.”

“You go to the psychiatrist?” Will asks, slightly amused.

“Yes,” he simply replies.

“Are they as ethical as you are?” Will teases him.

Hannibal chuckles. “Not at all.”

After the usual greetings and small talk with Bedelia, she offers him a glass of wine before serving another one for herself, and they both sit in their chairs. Hannibal takes a sip before letting out a small yawn. Bedelía tilts her head.

“Long day?” she asks. She doesn’t think she’s ever seen Hannibal yawn in all her years of knowing him.

“I slept very little,” he confesses. “Will’s children called me early in the morning because he was sleepwalking and had a fever,” he explains. “He has encephalitis.” He purses his lips and looks to the side, sighing.

“You’re angry,” she comments. “Why?”

Hannibal inhales and exhales, deeply, before answering. “I should’ve been able to detect it before it got to this point,” he says.

“Encephalitis is hard to detect in its early stages,” Bedelia says. “Much more without a brain scan.”

“At first I thought his headaches and health decline was a consequence of the stress and the increased pressure the head of the Behavioral Analysis Unit was putting on him to solve more crimes more quickly,” he says. “With his particular disorder and way of thinking, he not only gets inside the killers' minds but also lets them into his own. I should have known that he’s far too used to the fact for it to begin affecting him only now.”

“Your anger doesn’t stem from you feeling like you failed,” Bedelia dares to say. “You’re angry and confused because you’re worried about him. He climbed the walls you so carefully constructed, and you are at a loss on how to deal with it.”

Hannibal stays momentarily quiet.

“Will’s nothing like me. We see the world in different ways, yet he can assume my point of view,” he says.

“By profiling the criminally insane?” she asks.

Hannibal smiles. “As good a demonstration as any. I find it reassuring.”

“It’s nice to have someone see us, Hannibal, or have the ability to see us. It requires trust. Trust isn’t easy for you.”

“Will has seen more of me than anyone before,” Hannibal admits.

“Yet after so many years of constructing it, you’re reasonably wary of stripping off the person suit completely,” Bedelia continues.

“Why?”

“Because you love him,” she replies, “and love makes us vulnerable. What happened the last time you loved someone, Hannibal?”

Still shaken from his session with Bedelia, he goes back to the hospital right on time for visiting hours and finds a lot of people in Will’s room. Elijah and Beth are back, as well as Elijah’s girlfriend, and some other teenagers, possibly Beth and Elijah’s friends, all of them chatting. Will is laughing at something Beverly and Zeller are telling him, while Jimmy’s husband speaks with Stella in one corner of the room. There are also some people Hannibal doesn’t recognize.

Together, everyone makes arrangements for helping Will. One of Elijah’s friends, who’s a year older than him and has a driving license, offers to drive him and Beth to school while Will’s unable to do so. Jimmy and Hannibal volunteer to feed the dogs, and he also offers to cook for the kids, alongside Stella. Hannibal and Beverly are the ones who’ll be staying overnight the most.

It goes like that for a couple of weeks, and Hannibal is relieved to see the slow but sure progress Will is making, the antibiotics doing their job properly. He has to stop a few attempts of Jack trying

to send files to Will and come visit to help him with their new case, in the end offering assistance himself to let his partner heal properly.

“How did work go?” Will asks him when he visits him for dinner that night.

“It was interesting,” Hannibal replies, opening the tupperware and carrying their food.

“How so?”

“I’m not supposed to tell outsiders details about the case,” Hannibal teases. “It’s confidential.”

Will rolls his eyes. “Please, don’t pretend you have ethical concerns now, doctor Lecter.”

Hannibal chuckles.

“Please, I’m terribly bored here,” Will says, “and don’t tell me that talking about cases isn’t good for my recovery, the doctors are already considering my discharge.”

“Are they now?”

“So did Matthew tell me.”

Hannibal finishes serving their dinner before talking. “A member of the Baltimore Metropolitan Orchestra got killed, and turned into a human cello.”

Will blinks as he grabs his fork. “Human cello?”

“Douglas Wilson, a trombone player,” Hannibal continues, “His vocal cords were treated with chemicals and fashioned into a makeshift cello; the neck of a violin jammed down his gullet. He was displayed on the stage of the auditorium.”

“Did you know him?” Will asks.

“I’ve heard him play a couple of times, yes.”

“Was he any good?”

“His killer certainly didn’t think so. He was killed sometime after his last performance, blunt force trauma to the back of the head.”

“What about you?”

“I find that I agree with the killer,” Hannibal says. He takes a bite, then continues, “He took him back to the stage to put on a show.”

“A skilled musician trying on a new instrument?”

Hannibal nods. “The killer was performing. The question is for whom.”

“A fellow musician, maybe,” Will suggests. “A patron of the arts. Maybe another killer.”

“A one-night-only serenade.”

“You think he isn’t going to kill like this again?” Will swallows a piece of food. “This is delicious, by the way.”

“Thank you,” Hannibal smiles. “No, the killer has killed before, there’s a confidence to what he does that comes with practice, and not having gotten caught.”

“So he risked getting caught for this serenade?” Will frowns. “Maybe he wants to show someone how well he plays.” He pauses and smiles, “like you when you kill in front of me,” he adds with a fond tone that doesn’t match his words.

Hannibal smiles at him. “It hadn’t occurred to me to serenade you in this way.”

“Sounds like a perfect romantic evening for me,” Will jokes.

“Who would you have me kill?” Hannibal wonders, tilting his head.

“I don’t know,” Will says. “Someone rude.” He takes a sip of water. “Do you have any pictures of the body?”

“No, but I wouldn’t be surprised if you found them on Miss Lound’s website.”

Will sighs. “That woman.” He clicks his tongue but grabs his phone to search for it anyway.

When he finds it, he spends some minutes in silence as he analyzes it. Hannibal wonders if he is empathizing with the killer. “Did Jack tell you he suspected it might be a ripper kill when he called you?” he asks.

“Yes, actually,” Hannibal replies, curious about what Will might say next.

“There are some similarities in the artistry of the tableau,” he says.

“So it’s not him?”

Will gives him an amused glance before returning his gaze to the screen. “No, it’s not,” he says, then shakes his head. “Although he might know who he is.”

That makes Hannibal stop what he’s doing to look at him. “Why do you say that?” He remembers what Franklyn told him during his last session about Tobias saying very dark things. Something clicks.

“I don’t know,” Will says, suddenly starting to worry. “Hannibal, you have to be careful.” He puts a hand on his arm on top of the table. “If this killer knows who you are…” he trails off at the look on Hannibal’s face. He rolls his eyes. “Oh, come on, Hannibal, I know you’re the ripper. I’ve known since you killed Cassie Boyle and fed her to me. You are not exactly good at hiding it,” he says. “Just as well as you know who I am.”

“The Vigilante", Hannibal says.

“The FBI is not very creative at choosing names,” Will says, “but yes. You thought you could keep it hidden from me, with my empathy and all?”

“I was hoping I could hide it until I found the time and inspiration to dedicate you a sounder, as you call them,” Hannibal confesses.

“Your kind of serenade,” Will smiles, and Hannibal returns it.

They eat in silence for a couple of minutes, smiling stupidly.

“I might have an idea of who the violinist might be.”

“Really? Who?”

“Do you remember my patient, the one we met at the opera?”

Will frowns. “Franklyn?”

“Yes, he mentioned during our last session that his friend, Tobias, had been saying dark things to him lately,” he says. “He owns a string shop.”

Will’s gaze turns dark at the mention of Tobias.

“It makes sense,” he agrees. “I did sense something off about him that time.”

“You did.”

“You have to be careful about him, Hannibal,” Will says. “Let the FBI deal with it. He’s not an amateur.”

“I don’t think he wants to kill me.”

“If he’s telling Franklyn ‘dark stuff’ is because he knows he’ll tell you,” Will says. “He’s courting you,” he adds with venom in his voice.

“I’ll have to reject him,” Hannibal says, amused.

“Hannibal,” Will says seriously. “Don’t do anything stupid.”

“You have nothing to worry about.”

Will doubts it. He wishes he weren’t trapped in the hospital. He wants to cut Tobias’ fingers one by one, rip his eyes and heart out from merely entertaining the idea of touching what belongs to him. If Hannibal listens to him and does nothing, he hopes the FBI takes a long enough time to find him so Will can get out of there and do the job himself.

A couple of days pass and Will doesn’t read any news about the case, so he’s glad that Hannibal hasn’t gone against his wishes.

Alana shows up one day, apologizing for the conversation they had at Hannibal’s house and how she talked about Elijah, and Will can tell she’s sincerely sorry even when he knows she’ll never stop being suspicious about what happened to Elijah’s parents. As long as she doesn’t act on those suspicions, everything will be fine. So he forgives her.

Everything is peaceful for a couple of days but, of course, because he can’t ever catch a break, the peace doesn’t last.

It’s Saturday morning and Hannibal drove Beth to rehearsal before picking up Abigail to visit Will. They keep him company as the doctors analyze his latest tests to see if he can be released from the

hospital today. Will hopes so. He misses his dogs, and his freedom as well.

Will is on his bed, using Hannibal's tablet to check his mail since he grew tired of reading on the small screen of his phone. Abigail is telling them about Freddie Lounds' insistent attempts at interviewing her and consequently getting kicked out by the clinic personnel when Hannibal's phone rings. She chooses that moment to excuse herself to the bathroom.

Hannibal checks the caller ID and frowns.

"Is it Jack?" Will deduces.

"Yes," Hannibal replies, accepting the call. "Hello?"

Will opens a new tab to check TattleCrime. His hunch tells him that whatever happened must already be on the site, as it always appeared to be lately. When the website loads, he wishes he had been wrong.

No.

This can't be happening.

Shit, shit, shit, shit.

His heart races and he is sure he can hear the sound of his blood pumping faster and faster.

Hannibal wouldn't do that. He wouldn't. He wouldn't betray them like that. He wouldn't betray him like that. Right? No, it can't be.

It can't be. It can't be real. It can't.

He blinks, but when he opens his eyes again, the picture is still there, mocking him.

Yes, it's real.

On TattleCrime's homepage, there's a photograph of Nick Boyle's corpse.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Hi! Happy Christmas Eve!

I hope you enjoy the chapter!

Will finds it difficult to breathe. He can't focus on what Hannibal is telling Jack nor can he see anything other than the picture on the screen.

Nick Boyle's mouth is wide open, inside of which is the neck of a saxophone. He's dressed in the same clothes he was wearing when Abigail stabbed him, and the wound in his belly is opened to reveal the guts and his intestines resting on his lap. It's horrifying. There's nothing artistic about it. A mere imitation of the violinist, devoid of heart.

"Will." He doesn't realize Hannibal is calling his name until he touches his arm. It makes him jump.

"Hannibal, what the fuck!?" he reacts. "What the fuck?"

"I know just about the same as you do about this," Hannibal replies, calmly.

Will glances at the bathroom, where Abigail is, and lowers his voice.

"Hannibal, what the fuck?" he repeats in a whisper this time. "Only the three of us knew about this. What the fuck have you done?"

The pain that appears on Hannibal's face makes Will's heart drop.

"Will, think rationally about this," he says. "What do you think I'll gain by doing this? What would my motive be?"

"I don't know," Will replies. His mind is too foggy at the moment. "You did call the Hobbs' house that day just because you were curious what I would do. If I could kill."

"Yes, and in this situation?"

"You bring attention to Abigail. To all of us," Will realizes. "You don't gain anything by this. It brings suspicion on yourself, and you value your freedom too much."

"Indeed."

"I'm sorry." Will exhales deeply and hides his head in his hands.

"It's alright, dear Will," Hannibal says, just as Abigail exits the bathroom. "I might have done it to see how you two behaved, in another life."

"Is everything okay?" Abigail asks, eyes anxiously darting between the two. "I heard screaming."

Hannibal and Will look at each other, simultaneously licking their lips.

"Jack called," Hannibal says.

"Oh, God." She covers her mouth with her hands, tears brimming in her eyes. "Did they find him?"

“Why do you say that?” Will asks. As much as it hurts, they have to consider every possibility.

“Will,” Hannibal warns, anticipating Abigail’s anger.

“You think I did, what? Reported where the body was?” Abigail asks. “Why would I do that? How would I explain to the FBI that I know where the body is without incriminating myself? It’d practically be the same as confessing.”

“Will is not accusing you of anything, Abigail,” Hannibal steps in to calm the situation down. “He’s trained to consider every possibility, that’s all. We don’t think you did it.”

Abigail sighs and sits down on the edge of the bed. “How did they discover him? I thought we did a good job of burying him, and the snow shouldn’t have melted yet.”

“He was not discovered in Minnesota,” Will says. “Someone brought him to Baltimore and displayed him in the style of The Violinist,” he explains, the fog clearing slowly but surely. “We’re going to need alibis for the last few days. Whoever did it, couldn’t have taken a flight with the body all the way here, and it’s an eighteen-hour drive.”

“I was in the clinic, Will was here,” Abigail says, then looks at Hannibal and swallows, visibly scared. “Hannibal?” she asks, voice barely audible.

“I had patients all day on Thursday and Friday, and spent last night here with Maddie and Elijah,” he replies. “However, we also have to consider the possibility of someone digging him up months back and only deciding to display it now.”

“That’s another possibility,” Will sighs. “I assume Jack wants you at the crime scene?”

“That’s why he called,” Hannibal says with a nod. “I suppose he’ll want to interrogate Abigail again soon.”

“Can we accelerate the discharging process? I want to see the body,” Will says, jumping from the bed.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Hannibal says, turning to exit the room. The situation is too critical to complain about Will needing even more rest. They can’t stay idle, or things will go astray rapidly.

“I’ll get dressed,” Will says.

“I’ll wait in the hall,” Abigail decides.

When Will gets out of his room, clothes changed and bag packed, he finds Hannibal speaking to Matthew. The nurse hands him some papers to sign and Will does so without question, not paying attention to whatever he is telling him. They meet eyes once that’s done. Matthew smiles at him,

showing him his teeth, and his eyes shine despite the eye bags under them that speak of how tired he is. Will frowns, finding it odd, but he's in too much of a hurry to pay it further attention.

They drop Abigail off at the clinic and after that, they're at the crime scene in a record-breaking time of twenty minutes.

"Will, what are you doing here?" Beverly says as she sees him approaching.

"I got discharged," he replies.

"Shouldn't you be resting still?" she says. "I don't think using your empathy so soon, especially in a case like this, it's a good idea," she adds, concerned.

"I have to do it especially because it's a case like this, Bev," Will says. He grabs a pair of latex gloves that Hannibal passes to him and puts them on.

Beverly wants to argue something more, but Jack's approach prevents it.

"Doctor Lecter, you're here," Jack says. "And Will Graham, what a surprise."

"Good morning, Jack," Hannibal greets him.

"I'm glad to see you're out of the hospital, Will, it's good to have you back," Jack says, and Will nods. "I'm sure Hannibal already told you about the crime scene." His tone is slightly accusatory. "Nicholas Boyle."

"How was he killed?" Will asks as if he doesn't know. The three of them climb the stairs of the stage.

"He was stabbed in the abdomen," Jack informs. "But there's blunt force trauma on the back of the neck as well."

"Like The Violinist," Hannibal comments.

"Presented in the same way as well," Jack adds as the body comes into view.

"The Violinist didn't do this," Will says. "There's nothing artistic about this, it's devoid of meaning."

"We'll leave you to it," Jack tells him. "Let's go, everyone. You too, Beverly. Doctor Lecter."

Hannibal's fingers brush the small of his back before leaving and Will presses back, grateful for the support it brings him.

He's left alone and lets the pendulum swing, closing his eyes. When he opens his eyes again, he's back at the Hobbs' residence, Abigail and Hannibal kneeling on the ground next to the dead body. He sees himself standing near them and relives the conversation they had that day, only that this time instead of staying to clean the scene, he follows Hannibal and Abigail out of the house. He sees Hannibal carrying Nick Boyle to the rental car, Abigail walking near him, still shocked. Hannibal puts the body in the trunk and Will gets into the car with them. The drive isn't long, and they're soon burying the body under the thick snow of the surrounding forest.

He shakes his head. All of that is information he already knows.

He closes his eyes and lets the pendulum swing once more. When he opens his eyes this time, he is standing in that same forest, where it's no longer snowing, and the rental car is nowhere to be seen.

"I came here with a purpose," he says. He has a shovel in his hands. "I know exactly where the body is and who this person used to be." He digs in the ground, shoveling the thin layer of snow as well as the soil under it. "I grab the body and carry it to my car. There's a long drive ahead of me."

Will closes his eyes and opens them again, now finding himself standing on the stage as he was before, with an empty chair at his side and carrying Nick Boyle on his shoulder. He sits the body on the chair.

"I slice open the sides of your mouth to make the slide of the trumpet easier," he says. He grabs a trumpet from the ground. "I do this quickly, half-heartedly. I imitate just to hide the true nature behind my crime." He rolls up his sleeves. "I put my hand on his stomach wound and slid in, searching for his intestines and pulling them out."

Something is missing, something he isn't seeing. "The body is a message, placed here to be found by someone in particular. I think I know who killed Nick Boyle, and I want that person to know I do."

"It's a courtship," he realizes. "This is my design."

He shakes the vision away and takes a deep breath. He has to think of something to tell Jack before calling him back inside. He can't know the true intention of the person that displayed the body, but he can't lie to him too much or Jack will for sure realize something is wrong. He has to come up with something, fast.

An idea comes to him when he remembers the conversation he had with Abigail in the car earlier.

"So, what did you see?" Jack asks him, coming back to the stage after Will called him. Hannibal and the rest of the BAU team are with him.

"This killer's been following the Minnesota Shrike investigation," Will says. "He's personally involved with it in some way. Nick Boyle represented a threat to him."

"You think that this killer is directly involved in the case?" Jack takes the bait.

"He might be the missing helper of Garret Jacob Hobbs you've been trying to find," Will continues. "Have you looked into transport records, how he was moving from one state to another to search for the girls?" he asks, using the information Abigail gave him on the way to the clinic. "You might find purchase records of two tickets."

"You think this killer helped Hobbs hunt?" Jack frowns. Will knows he doesn't completely buy it, but it doesn't matter as long as it gives them enough time to find whoever is behind this and deal with them directly.

"Possibly," Will answers. "Nick Boyle attacked us at the house, maybe this person is protective of Abigail the way her father was."

"He killed him to protect her? Didn't Garret Jacob Hobbs want to eat her?"

"I'm not sure about anything anymore," Will sighs, making a show of rubbing his temples.

Hannibal moves a few steps forward to stand between the two men.

“Jack, Will was discharged from the hospital but they advised him not to put himself through stressful situations,” he says, “as it can reactivate the virus.”

“You’re right, doctor, I’m sorry,” Jack says, still feeling responsible for what happened to him. “I’ll call you if anything of interest shows up in the autopsy. You should rest. I still might have to call you to question you about the night Nick Boyle attacked you, in case you remember something new. Abigail as well.”

After saying goodbye to Jack, they drive to pick up Beth from the ballet academy and Elijah from his girlfriend's house, then Hannibal leaves for his Saturday afternoon appointments with the promise of making dinner for the four of them later that day.

Franklyn is his last patient of the afternoon. Hannibal checks his phone to see if there is any news about the case, and he finds a text message from Will, requesting him to call him as soon as possible. Just then, there’s a knock on the door. Hannibal gets up from his desk and walks towards it to open it.

“Good afternoon, Doctor Lecter,” Franklyn greets him.

“Good afternoon, Franklyn,” Hannibal says. “Would you mind waiting for a couple of minutes inside my office? I need to make an urgent call. I’m afraid it can’t wait,” he adds.

“Uh, sure, yeah, I can wait,” his patient accepts. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes, you don’t have anything to worry about. Please.” He moves to the side to allow Franklyn inside the office before exiting it himself and closing the door behind his back.

He waits a few moments before calling Will to make sure Franklyn has taken his seat and isn’t listening through the door.

“Hello,” Will answers almost immediately. “Are you alone?”

“Hello, Will,” Hannibal says. “Yes, I am.”

“Good. Beverly texted me the details of the autopsy,” he starts. “The team hasn’t told Jack what they found yet because they don’t want him dragging me around, but they will have to tell him soon.”

“What did they find?”

“There was a crumpled up note inside the saxophone’s neck that says ‘I know who you are’, written in blood.”

“Whose blood was it?”

“We don’t know yet, which gives us some extra time as well,” Will says. “If he knows about us somehow, we have to kill him.”

“I agree,” Hannibal nods.

“Can you think of anyone that might’ve followed us that day in Minnesota? An unstable patient, perhaps, or an ex-patient?” Will asks.

“It’s a possibility,” Hannibal admits. “I have one last patient this afternoon, but I’ll check on some of them as soon as the session is over. I’ll text you before going to pick you up.”

“Alright. I’ll go over what happened in my head again, see if I missed something.”

“Don’t overwork yourself, Will. I don’t want that beautiful mind of yours to get hurt again.”

“Well I don’t have a choice, do I? It’s not like we have time to lose.”

“I know, my love,” Hannibal sighs. “I just ask you to be careful.”

“I will,” Will sighs as well. “See you later. Good luck with your patient.”

“Thank you, I’ll need it,” Hannibal sighs.

Will laughs. “Are they that bad?”

“It’s Franklyn. I’m giving him a referral. I doubt he’ll take it well,” Hannibal explains.

“Uh, well, good luck with that,” Will repeats.

“Thank you, Will. I look forward to seeing you tonight.”

Will takes a few seconds before replying, “Me too.”

Hannibal hangs up, takes a deep breath, and opens the door of his office, where Franklyn is waiting for him seated in his chair, tapping his fingers against the armrest.

“Pardon the wait,” Hannibal apologizes, walking to his chair.

“Oh, don’t worry about it, Doctor Lecter,” Franklyn replies with a smile. “Is everything okay with your family?”

“Why do you assume the call was related to a family matter?”

“Oh, it wasn’t?” he says. “Sorry, I just thought…well, this is the first time I’ve ever seen you make a call and have a patient wait. I assumed it must’ve been related to your family for it to be so urgent.”

“I appreciate the sentiment, Franklyn, but whether it was a family matter or not, I can not tell you,” Hannibal responds. “There’s a limit we ought to maintain in psychiatrist-patient relationships. A limit you’re always trying to break.”

“But I want to be your friend!” Franklyn repeats what he’s been insisting on during the last few weeks. “Why can’t I?”

“Franklyn.” Hannibal licks his lips, bracing himself for the reaction his following words will have. “I don’t think it’s a good idea for me to keep looking after your mental well-being.”

Franklyn's jaw drops, and they stare at each other in silence for a couple of minutes before the man processes what the psychiatrist is telling him. Franklyn counts with his fingers until he reaches nine.

"Nine times," he declares. "I can count on two hands the number of times I've been dumped by a psychiatrist."

"I'm sorry, Franklyn, I think it's best if you see another doctor."

"You're giving me a referral."

"Yes."

"You were a referral!" he exclaims, gesturing with his hands.

"And I'm also part of the problem," Hannibal keeps speaking calmly. "You focus too much on your therapist and not enough on your therapy."

"You lost respect for me because I wouldn't report Tobias, didn't you?" Franklyn accuses.

Hannibal is about to argue against it, but a third voice interrupts him.

"Report Tobias for what?" Tobias says.

Franklyn's surprise to see Tobias standing in the doorway of the patient entrance is clear on his face. Hannibal's is less so. He notices that the intruder is wearing a hat and a jacket to obscure his bloodied hands and clothes.

"Tobias…?" Franklyn starts.

Hannibal stands up as Tobias moves into the room.

"I came to say goodbye, Franklyn," he says.

"What do you mean goodbye?" He notices the blood as well. "Oh my God," he blurts out, "Is that your blood?"

"I just killed two men," Tobias admits matter-of-factly. "The FBI came to question me about the murder."

Hannibal feels grateful that Will isn't part of The Violinist's investigation. He could've been whom Tobias killed, especially if the encephalitis had gone untreated. Hannibal shakes the vision off, focusing back on the conversation.

"You have to turn yourself in," Franklyn says. "This plane is going down. Let it be a controlled descent. You can get back up in the air again. There is rehabilitation for everyone."

"Franklyn, I want you to leave now," Hannibal warns.

"Stay right where you are, Franklyn," Tobias warns as well.

The man ignores them both, stepping forward to try and calm his friend.

“You’ve done something horrible and I know you wish to god you didn’t, but you did and there’s nothing you can do to change that,” he says. “Only thing you can change is your future. You’re probably scared. Probably feel like you’re all alone.”

“I’m not alone,” Tobias says, looking at Hannibal. “Someone responded to my serenade, although they took their time to do so. I was beginning to think they were never going to reciprocate.”

Oh, well. They can discard Tobias as being the one to display Nick Boyle’s body, then.

“What…?” Franklyn looks at Hannibal, confused.

Enough. The psychiatrist moves swiftly and snaps Franklyn’s neck, dropping him to the ground like a cinder block.

“I was looking forward to that,” Tobias says, almost pouting, which Hannibal finds amusing.

“I saved you the trouble,” he says.

“I’m glad you finally responded to my gift,” Tobias says. “Franklyn gave you my message.”

“I don’t know who you think I am, Tobias, but I never received a gift from you,” Hannibal says.

“Really?” Tobias asks, smiling. “I followed you one night, out of town, out of state, to a lonely road,” he says.

Hannibal tenses. If he didn’t realize he was being followed by Tobias, what else did he not notice? How has he let his defenses down so much?

“You’re reckless, Tobias.”

“I’m not going to tell anyone what I saw you do, and do well, so my recklessness doesn’t concern you,” he replies.

“What is it that you want?” Hannibal wants to know.

“I could use a friend,” Tobias replies. “Someone who can understand me, who thinks like I do, and can see the world and the people in it the way I do.”

“I know how you feel,” Hannibal says, stepping a bit closer. Tobias looks at him with expectation, eyes gleaming. “But I’m afraid I already have someone in my life who sees the world the way I do, and he’s terribly jealous.” Hannibal grabs an ornament from the nearby table and throws it in the direction of Tobias’ head.

Tobias dodges it with ease and slashes the air with a razor-sharp piano wire whip that he pulled from his sleeve. Hannibal raises his forearm to block it and it shreds his coat arm. He moves quickly, closing the distance between them and neutralizing the wire. Dropping low, he thrusts an open palm towards Tobias’ mid-section, then allows his hand to glide up his nemesis’ chest toward his vulnerable chin.

Tobias deflects the death blow at the last second and locks Hannibal’s arm, but the latter uses his weight advantage against him and tosses Tobias over the desk, slamming him hard against a support column.

Hannibal vaults over the desk, wrapping the crook of his arm around Tobias' throat and pulling tight. Tobias fights to remain conscious as Hannibal locks his legs around him, increasing the tension on the garrote. In the struggle, Tobias finds a letter opener that fell from the desk. He uses it to stab Hannibal's leg.

Hannibal grunts in pain, and Tobias takes advantage of the moment to pin him to the desk, trying to stab him in the chest this time. Hannibal wraps a hand around his wrist to stop it, using all his strength. He looks to one side and sees a pen. He reaches for it and stabs Tobias' arm.

Tobias groans and straightens, holding his arm, so Hannibal gets up as well. Tobias kicks him in the chest, pushing him back toward the stairs, and slamming him hard against them. Hannibal remains still for a second and waits for Tobias to lunge at him, before dodging. Tobias' arm goes through the steps of the stairs and Hannibal seizes the opportunity to bend his arm back and break it.

As Tobias screams, Hannibal takes a moment to catch his breath before sending a precise and sharp punch to his throat, making the man fall to his knees as he coughs. Bruised and battered, Hannibal retrieves his pocket handkerchief to grab a heavy metal stag statue from a nearby pedestal and brings it down violently on Tobias' skull, which makes a sickening crack sound.

After that, he limps towards the bathroom in search of his medical kit. He grabs his phone from his pocket and he's relieved to see that it's still intact, even after the fight. He knows Will is with his kids. He's not sure how used Beth is to seeing dead bodies and he doesn't know if Elijah might react badly to it, considering the trauma he has with what happened with his parents. Hannibal knows he helps Will, but never directly hunts with him. Taking all of that into consideration, he decides to call Jack instead.

Jack arrives not long after, along with medical help for Hannibal, and a group of FBI agents.

"Tobias Budge kills two Baltimore Police Officers, and after that, his first stop is your office," he says.

"He came to kill my patient," Hannibal fakes sadness. "Franklyn was suspicious about Tobias, he thought he might have been the man who killed the two members of the orchestra."

"Your patient. Is that who Tobias was serenading?" Jack questions.

"I don't know," he says. "Franklyn knew more than what he was telling me. He told Mr. Budge he didn't have to kill anymore, then he broke Franklyn's neck and attacked me."

"And then you killed him," Jack accuses.

Hannibal gazes with convincing sadness at Franklyn's corpse as it is placed into a body bag and hosted onto a gurney. "Yes," he confesses.

"Could your patient have been involved with any of what Budge was doing?"

"I think this is a simple matter of poor choice in friends," he sighs.

"Your patient thought Budge killed Nick Boyle?"

"Yes," Hannibal replies.

Jack nods. "Will said he didn't."

“Franklyn might’ve been wrong about that, it was mere suspicion,” Hannibal says. “Or perhaps Will is wrong.”

“Perhaps,” Jack says, mind somewhere else.

He eyes Hannibal for a brief moment. Hannibal can tell he’s not fully convinced with his story, especially after what happened with Boyle, but he doesn’t add anything more. Jack turns his attention to the crime scene and the two bodies being wheeled out.

Right at that time, Will walks hurriedly inside the room. Two agents try to stop him but he flashes his badge at them and runs in Hannibal’s direction, ignoring Jack’s look.

“Will,” Hannibal calls his name.

Will throws his arms around him, hugging him tightly against his chest. Hannibal lets out an involuntary pained moan.

“God, I’m sorry,” Will apologizes, quickly moving back. “I was so worried.”

“Where are the kids?” Hannibal asks.

“They’re at Isabela´s house,” Will brushes it off. “I ran here as soon as I heard.”

“I’m fine,” Hannibal brushes it off.

“You were stabbed, Hannibal,” Will says. “And your face is all bloody.” He sits on the desk and takes gauze from the medical kit, dabbing at his forehead.

“I’ve been through worse,” Hannibal smiles.

Will chuckles, shaking his head. He leans over to whisper in his ear. “I wish I could’ve killed him myself.”

“He said he wanted to be my friend,” Hannibal whispers back. “I told him I have a frightfully jealous partner.”

They smile at each other, and Will takes advantage of the angle to steal a peck from his lips.

Nearby, Jack clears his throat, and the couple reluctantly separates, turning to look at him.

“We, um, we’ll need a formal declaration from you about what happened, Doctor Lecter, if you don’t mind coming with me to the bureau,” he says, looking everywhere other than their eyes.

“Pardon me, Jack, but I’m tired and I promised Will that I would cook for him and the kids in celebration of his release from the hospital,” Hannibal replies, sounding more serious than Will has ever heard him speak to Jack. “Can it wait until tomorrow?”

“Of course, Doctor,” Jack concedes, clearly annoyed about it but in no position to force Hannibal to follow his orders.

After Jack and most of the FBI leave, Will helps Hannibal to the Bentley.

“One of Beverly’s siblings works for a crime scene cleaner company,” Will tells him while he fastens his seatbelt. “I can tell her to call him for help if you want. At least to keep appearances. You’re not supposed to know how to clean blood and get rid of fingerprints,” he says.

Hannibal chuckles. “Yes, that’d be perfect. Thank you.”

“It’s nothing,” Will says, then looks at Hannibal’s leg. His pants still have a dark stain of blood on them. “Are you sure you don’t want to go to the hospital? I can drive you.”

“I’ll be fine, Will, the EMTs did a good job with the sewing, and gave me painkillers,” Hannibal reassures. “I have a high tolerance for pain,” he adds. “And, as I said, I’ve been through worse.”

“Okay,” Will accepts. He knows there’s a story behind his words Hannibal is not ready to tell him yet.

They drive to Isabela’s house to pick up Beth and Elijah, who are equally worried about Hannibal, and also ask him if he wouldn’t prefer to go to the hospital.

“I can cook dinner, if you want,” Elijah offers once they get to Hannibal’s house. “You should rest.”

“Thank you, Elijah, for the kind offer, but I’m confident I can do it,” Hannibal says. “You are free to join me as a sous chef if you’d like.”

The teenager smiles at him. “Okay.”

“Good,” Hannibal smiles as well.

After a lovely dinner consisting of creamy tortellini soup with sausages and a dessert of ricotta and cinnamon trifle with salted amaretto, Will and Hannibal retire to Hannibal’s study to talk while Elijah and Beth prepare for bed.

“So, The Violinist case is closed,” Will says, not knowing where to start.

“Yes,” Hannibal nods. “But his copycat is still out there.”

“We have to find him, and find him fast, Hannibal.” Will sits on top of the desk, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Does the note mean he knows who the both of us are?” Hannibal asks, sitting next to him.

“I can’t be sure how much he knows. When I empathized with him, since I was there when Nick Boyle died, I saw ourselves from an outside perspective. I don’t know how much he saw, but to know where the body was buried, the one thing we can for sure know that he saw is Abigail and you dump it.”

“So he probably doesn’t know that I’m the Chesapeake Ripper, or you The Vigilante,” Hannibal says.

Will shakes his head. “I’m not sure. On one hand, there’s the possibility of him catching you burying Boyle by chance, and then realizing who the boy was through the news. If he frequents TattleCrime, he might’ve seen your picture there, identified you,” he says.

“And the other possibility?” Hannibal asks.

“The other possibility is that he’s known who you are for a longer time. Someone you know but are not too close to. A stalker.”

“A very compromised stalker if he followed us all the way to Minnesota,” Hannibal says.

“Yes, the first possibility is more plausible,” Will declares.

“The easiest way to find out who he is is by replying to his message,” Hannibal proposes, remembering the words Tobias told him earlier.

“Kill and display someone to pass some type of message?” Will asks. “How are we going to send him a message he can understand, but the FBI can’t?”

“Well, if we’re assuming he knows who I am, we can get him to come to us,” Hannibal says.

“So we kill someone, display them and leave a note that says, what? ‘Come find me’ or something like that?”

“We leave the note in plain sight and send an anonymous tip to TattleCrime,” Hannibal adds.

“To make sure he reads it,” Will nods. “It’s a good plan, although risky.”

“What is life if not a daring adventure?” he says with a smile.

“Alright,” Will sighs. “Who shall we kill?”

“Why don’t you choose?”

“No,” Will shakes his head. “If this person is a stalker, he’s familiar with the way you kill. We can’t let a difference in motive or killing style ruin our plan,” he explains. “Were you planning to kill anyone soon?”

“Tobias,” Hannibal admits, “but that’s done. Why don’t you pick someone from my Rolodex?”

“Your Rolodex?” Will quirks up an eyebrow.

“Yes,” Hannibal says, and motions for Will to follow him. “I keep the business cards of everyone that I find rude there.”

“In the kitchen,” Will says once he realizes where they’re going. “Of course,” he laughs.

Hannibal opens a cabinet and takes out a Rolodex, identical to the one he uses to keep recipes that are always on the corner of the counter. He places it in front of Will, who spins it to browse through the cards. There are too many to properly count, but he guesses that they’re more than a hundred. He picks one that catches his attention since he recognizes Hannibal’s handwriting on it.

“Why is this one different?” he asks.

“Ah, that one.” Hannibal takes it from his hands. “Farah Ayad, a ballet dancer. She mistakenly assumed I was romantically interested in her when I asked for her card, so she wrote her name and number on a paper napkin instead. I rewrote it on proper paper to store it here,” he explains.

“A ballerina,” Will says. “Fits the pattern of the recent displays,” he mutters.

Hannibal smiles at him, observing the gears inside Will's mind hard at work. "Do you have a tableau in mind, dear?"

"I think I do," he smiles back.

They go to bed after that. After spending a long time in the hospital, Will is grateful for the comfort that Hannibal's firm mattress and silk bed sheets bring him, as well as the man's chest that serves as a pillow to lie against. He's mindful not to exert any type of pressure against Hannibal's injury.

"How's your leg?" Will asks in a whisper.

"It's just a minor inconvenience," he replies. "It'll heal in no time. Is your head okay?"

"Yes, I don't have a headache nor anything of that sort," Will says, then sighs. "It's like I'm finally free from the stormy weather. The sky's cleared and I can finally think." He yawns, then rubs his cheek against Hannibal's chest, leaving a small kiss there.

Hannibal holds him tighter. "Sleep well, my love," he murmurs, kissing the crown of his head. "We have a long day waiting for us tomorrow."

Their victim conveniently lives in Sterling, so Hannibal drives them to the Graham's residence the following day. Will is immediately swarmed by the pack of dogs the moment the door opens and Mrs. Scott comes to say hi to him as well.

Hannibal spends the day helping Beth with her math homework, while Elijah types incessantly on his laptop. From the living room windows, Will can be seen playing outside with the dogs, boots muddied from the moist soil due to the rapidly melting snow.

Will comes back inside when Hannibal is cooking something quick with Elijah and Beth, so they have dinner and Will takes a shower as Hannibal gets everything ready for the long evening ahead. They go over the plan during dinner, bouncing ideas off each other as they often do when discussing other cases. Hannibal thinks the plan is very solid, and Will hopes that the stalker isn't very clever.

Hannibal leaves the house right after dinner, driving the Bently to Sterling. He parks next to a convenience store and enters. He goes straight to the alcoholic beverages aisle, surprised that the simple open 24 hours store has such a big selection, including some rather expensive bottles of wine he personally buys on the regular. He ignores the itch to buy one of those as well and moves his eyes to the whisky offer instead. He selects a brand he knows Will likes, and grabs three bottles.

On his way to pay, he walks by an aisle displaying condoms and lube. He smiles and grabs a pack of spermicide ones, but doesn't pick a lube, remembering the whisky-flavored lube Zeller got Will for his secret Santa. This is not part of their initial plan, but he thinks it'll greatly help in giving them an alibi.

He makes sure to make polite conversation with the tired-looking cashier, who's working on what looks like an essay for university. Hannibal wishes them good luck with their studies, receiving a smile and a "Thank you, have a good evening!" in response, and then he's out.

He leaves the grocery bags inside his car but doesn't drive away. Instead, he opens the trunk to retrieve his murder suit, as Will enjoys calling it, and walks two blocks until he reaches Farah Ayad's house. It's a picturesque house, and Hannibal takes a few seconds to appreciate the architecture. If he weren't in such a hurry, he might've considered stopping to sketch it.

He takes off his shoes and picks the lock of the front door, walking inside and making as little noise as possible. The house is dark and quiet. Hannibal holds a scalpel in one hand and a small torch light in the other one. He moves slowly, examining every room and getting an idea of the floor plan of the house. He figures that the bedroom is on the upper floor, so he heads there, internally cursing when the steps of the stairs creak under his feet. He hears hissing from the top of the stairs, and he finds a white cat standing there, looking at him with its big blue eyes. It hisses again when Hannibal reaches the top and walks around it, but it doesn't attack him.

Hannibal turns off his torchlight, deciding that the door on the left of the hallway has the bigger possibility of being Farah Ayad's bedroom. He decidedly opens the door and smiles when he's right; the street light flirting through the window illuminates the room just enough to see the outline of the person lying on the bed. Hannibal approaches, but Farah moves, so he stays still, right at the end of the bed.

"Mr. Whiskers?" she calls sleepily, patting the mattress next to her. "Come here, baby."

The cat meows and runs inside the room, jumping on the bed. Farah hugs her close to her, but Mr. Whiskers hisses, startling her.

"Mr. Whiskers?" she asks, concerned. "What's wrong?" She frees her arm from under the blanket and turns on the lamp on the bedside table.

She sees Hannibal, freezing in fear for a second too long, and the man's hand is covering her mouth by the time she tries to scream.

"Sh, sh, sh, sh. This will be much easier if you relax," Hannibal whispers in her ear.

He searches in his pocket for his syringe with his free hand while the woman cries. She attempts to bite his hand when she feels the sting of the needle on her neck, but it's futile against Hannibal's signature mix of quick-acting sedatives. Mr. Whiskers chooses that moment to attack, a bit late to defend its owner, and it only manages to scratch the plastic suit without causing Hannibal any damage, other than he'll probably have to buy another suit to replace this one.

Hannibal changes the woman's pajamas for casual clothing and searches the closet for her dancers' clothes to bring with him. Then, she carries her outside with a hand wrapped around her shoulders and her waist, pretending she's drunk in case someone sees them, even when the streets are deserted. He places her in the trunk of the car and checks the time on his phone. He only spent fifteen minutes at Farah Ayad's house, perfect.

He drives back to Wolf Trap and arrives right on time for the next part of their plan: Mark Park, Will's noisy neighbor, always takes a run at the same time of the night, and passes right in front of Graham's property. Will opens the front door, wearing a shirt and a pair of shorts to pass as his pajamas, and Hannibal gets out of his car.

“Why are you here?” he asks, loud enough for Mark to hear them, but not too loud to seem like he’s screaming. “You told me you had patients early tomorrow.”

“I do indeed, but I wanted to bring you something,” Hannibal says, showing him one of the bottles of whisky.

Will smiles widely and laughs, then tilts his head to one side, still smiling. “You shouldn’t have, I could’ve gone buy some tomorrow.”

“And I wanted to drink a glass with you,” Hannibal smiles back, approaching him. “Shall we?”

Will sighs and brings Hannibal’s face closer to give him a small kiss. He takes advantage of the angle to peek at Mark, who stopped running to look at them while he pretends to be tying his shoelaces. Will has to resist the urge to roll his eyes.

They break the kiss and walk inside. They stay by the windows, waiting for Mark to leave and be far away enough to not see them get out again to switch Farah Ayad from the Bentley to Will’s car.

“Alright, see you in a while,” Will says after closing the trunk.

“Be careful,” Hannibal reminds him.

“I’ll try.”

They kiss and Will’s off.

He drives to Baltimore and a concert hall Hannibal previously chose, different from where Douglas Wilson and Nick Boyle’s bodies were found since that one still has extra security keeping watch. Will gets out of the car by himself first, making sure no one is around, then picks the locks of the place. He’s thankful for Elijah’s help with the security cameras.

Will walks back to the car to pick up Farah Ayad’s unconscious body and carries it inside, leaving it on the stage to get to work. He lays her down and poses her, using his knowledge of ballet thanks to Beth to imitate a passé en relevé.

When he is done with that, he closes his eyes and focuses, letting the pendulum swing to help him get into Hannibal’s mindset. He takes a deep breath before opening them again and lets his imagination and empathy guide him.

“I cut off her heart while she’s still alive,” he mutters as he works, “then I place it on her hands over her chest. It's equal parts an offering and a threat. I also extract her kidney; I know exactly how to cut her.”

He copies what he saw Hannibal do before to the best of his abilities, hoping his visual memory doesn’t fail him and smiles triumphantly when he extracts the kidney without causing it any sort of damage and not making a mess. Luckily, the blood is filtering between the tiles of the stage, so it doesn’t form any puddles he would have had to clean up.

Will’s also glad that she stays asleep for the entire thing, as he didn’t want to risk empathizing with her. She’ll soon be dead due to the blood loss.

He places the kidney in the container Hannibal gave him for that specific purpose, then grabs a pencil from the psychiatrist’s duffel bag. He wets the back of it in the blood leaking from her body,

and uses it to write a note on a piece of paper that reads “come find me then”. Will takes a moment to admire his work. Satisfied with it, he places it on top of the ballerina’s tutu.

“This is my design,” he whispers.

Will goes over everything, making sure he’s not leaving any evidence behind, then stores all of the tools he used back into Hannibal’s bag and walks out of the place.

He gets back to the house around midnight and leaves the car inside the shed. Hannibal greets him at the porch, still wearing his suit, and with some of the dogs trailing behind him, wagging their tails at Will.

“Why are you still awake?” Will asks, petting the dogs as he walks inside and closes the door behind him. “It’ll be embarrassing if you fall asleep in front of your patients tomorrow morning,” he adds teasingly.

“That’ll never happen,” Hannibal replies, sounding almost offended. “I was waiting for you. Did everything go according to plan?”

“Yes,” Will says, then remembers the container he’s holding. “Oh, here’s the liver by the way. Should I put it in the fridge?”

“Thank you, yes, please do that,” Hannibal nods.

Will goes to the kitchen before going up the stairs with Hannibal, and into the bedroom. He grabs a clean towel from a drawer, and a pair of boxers from another one.

“Do you mind if I join you in the shower?” Hannibal asks him, holding a towel and a change of clothes he got out of his travel bag.

Will squints at him. “This is the real reason you stayed awake, isn’t it?”

Hannibal smiles. “Maybe.”

“Pervert,” Will tells him, hitting him on the chest with no strength whatsoever. “Yes, you can come, but be quiet, my walls aren’t soundproofed like yours.”

Will follows Hannibal’s every moment as he strips, taking his time to unbutton his shirt. He is sure Hannibal is doing it on purpose, but the spell is too strong to look away or shoot him a snarky remark, so Will keeps his eyes glued on him, enjoying the show. He licks his lips when finally, finally, Hannibal’s underwear drops to the floor, and he doesn’t waste any time, pushing him firmly against the shower wall under the stream of water to claim his mouth.

Hannibal bites his lower lip and Will moans into his mouth, pushing Hannibal impossibly closer to himself by the waist, then lowering to squeeze his butt. Hannibal’s hands quickly find Will’s sensitive spots as well, one of them caressing between his legs while the other one squeezes his nipple. Hannibal breaks the kiss and noses at his neck, sniffing the skin before depositing a kiss over his pulse.

“I can still smell the blood on you,” he whispers. “I hope I could’ve been there to see you work, I’m sure you looked magnificent.”

Will kisses him.

“Next time,” he promises. “When the FBI has no reason to suspect us.”

Hannibal nods. He grabs the bottle of shampoo from the shelf.

“May I wash your hair?”

“Thank you,” Will accepts.

He turns around to let the man work his hands through his curls. Will relaxes almost instantly when Hannibal’s hands massage his head, his touch so gentle it makes his scalp tingle. He pushes Will gently under the stream of water to rinse it off, and Will notices the water tinting a faint shade of pink.

“How did blood get into my hair?” Will asks, frowning.

“Maybe you touched it when you still had your gloves on without noticing,” Hannibal suggests. “You have a habit of fixing your hair to keep it out of your face, especially now that it has gotten longer.”

“I hope I didn’t accidentally leave hair at the scene,” Will says.

“I’m sure you haven’t.” Hannibal kisses his shoulder, right over the spot he was stabbed when he was a cop.

“Let me wash your hair now,” Will says, turning around.

Hannibal smiles and lets him do so.

“Can I tell you something, Will?” Hannibal asks. Will doesn’t say anything, knowing the other man is just going to keep talking anyway. “Farah Ayad doesn’t fit the usual profile of the people you kill. Did it feel different taking her life compared to the others?”

“I don’t know,” Will shakes his head. “I was too focused on the plan to think about it.”

“She hasn’t committed any crimes, nor was she what you consider a bad person to be, and yet you managed to end her life all the same, on your own” Hannibal pushes, adding the last bit to differentiate her murder from their last shared kill.

“It was to protect my family,” Will says defensively. “Our family,” he adds, quieter.

Hannibal gifts him a sweet smile and a kiss on the tip of his nose for that.

“I know you did it to protect us. I’m just pointing to the fact that you are capable of violence without needing to disguise it as the right thing to do, or doing it with me” he says.

Will knows he is right. His first instinct is to get angry at him, deny what Hannibal is telling him, but he doesn’t have the energy for it. Dealing with Farah mentally drained him and he’s not ready to have this conversation right now. So he kisses Hannibal instead.

Hannibal kisses back, pushing Will against the shower wall. He wraps his arms around Will's waist and pulls them flush together, pressing himself against the younger man. Will lets out a moan and runs his hands through Hannibal's hair, pulling him closer under the stream of water by grabbing a handful of Hannibal’s ass.

“And you were calling me a pervert,” Hannibal chuckles against his lips.

"You are," Will laughs before they continue kissing, their tongues swirling together.

They kiss for a couple of minutes until Hannibal starts nibbling on Will’s neck, drawing marks along his jawline and making him gasp.

“Hannibal,” Will moans, “let’s go to the bedroom.”

Hannibal makes a sound of agreement and they kiss one last time before stepping out of the shower. They dry themselves with the towels and wrap them around their waists, more in an effort not to wet the house’s floor as they walk to the room than to keep their genitals hidden. It’s not like they haven’t seen everything already.

Will jumps on the bed once they get to the bedroom, bringing Hannibal with him so he’s lying on top of him. Hannibal continues his trail of kisses down Will’s neck and chest, biting lightly around his nipples.

“Hannibal,” Will groans.

Hannibal smirks and moves to suck one of Will’s nipples into his mouth. Will gasps and arches his back as Hannibal sucks harder. He almost manages to distract Will from his objective. He’s been wanting to have Hannibal’s cock inside his mouth since the first time they had sex, to feel its weight and heat against his tongue.

Eventually, Will finds the will to stop him, pulling on his hair to pull him off. Hannibal raises his eyebrows in question.

“What is it, love?” he asks.

“I, uh,” Will says, feeling shy out of the sudden. He licks his lips, looking everywhere except Hannibal’s eyes. “I kinda, uh, wanted to suck you off,” he says, “if you’re okay with it.”

Hannibal’s expression shifts into something between surprise and excitement, and he startles Will with a kiss. He bites down on his lower lip, hard enough to taste blood and he can’t help the slight whimper that leaves him.

“Of course, Will,” he says, “I’d love that.”

Will smiles, “Good.” He pats Hannibal’s sides. “Get up,” he requests.

Hannibal obeys while Will grabs the bottle of whisky-flavored lube that Brian got him from the drawer.

“I never thought I'd end up using this,” he murmurs.

He then shifts his position, letting his head hang off the edge of the bed.

“Come here,” Will says.

Hannibal walks closer. Will grabs the towel still covering his crotch and drops it to the floor, revealing his hardening cock. Will licks his lips, excited to finally give it some attention. He wraps

a hand around it, jerking it a few times before licking the tip and coating its length with the lube. Hannibal groans.

“Hannibal,” Will says, “fuck my throat.”

“Are you sure?” Hannibal asks, almost breathless.

“Why do you think I got into this position?” Will asks, chuckling. “Yes, please, I’ve been wanting to do it for weeks now.”

“You’re full of surprises, my dear,” Hannibal says and bends down to kiss his lips briefly. “Okay,” he accepts.

Hannibal grabs Will’s waits for leverage and to keep him in place before slowly thrusting inside his mouth, moaning as he feels Will’s hot mouth around him. Will lets out a muffled moan and encourages Hannibal to begin fucking him by grabbing a handful of his ass to accompany his movements.

Will swallows Hannibal whole, moaning with every movement of his hips. Hannibal feels so good he thinks he might come faster than he ever has, especially when his cock reaches Will’s throat. Surprisingly, he doesn’t gag, and Hannibal can see the way it expands to accommodate his cock.

He rocks his hips quickly, hypnotized by the sight and so distracted that he almost screams when he feels Will’s tongue licking his balls as they reach Will’s lips. Will manages to look smug, even with his mouth so full.

“You feel amazing, mano meilė,” Hannibal gasps.

Will moans in response.

Hannibal looks Will up and down and notices his hips moving, desperate for some sort of friction. He smiles and unties Will’s towel so he can apply pressure on his cock, slipping his fingers between his folds as he pumps in and out of Will’s mouth. He strokes Will slowly, and carefully, enjoying how his lover’s body responds to him.

Will moans so loud that he almost chokes on Hannibal’s cock. Hannibal knows he’s close to spilling inside of him, a few more thrusts and he’ll come. He buries a finger inside Will’s cunt and Hannibal feels Will’s throat tightening around his head. Hannibal’s head falls back, groaning at the sensation.

One look at Will’s eyes lets him know he wants Hannibal to come inside his mouth as much as Hannibal does. That does it. Hannibal explodes, coming deep inside his throat. Will holds onto his ass, keeping him from moving away as he swallows every drop, refusing to waste anything.

Will licks his lips once he’s done swallowing, enjoying the musky taste there, and watches as Hannibal pants heavily as his cock softens, still drunk on pleasure.

“Fuck, my love,” Hannibal says, the curse sounding weird coming out of him. “You’re perfect.”

Will smiles, shifting on the bed so he’s resting on his stomach. “I’m glad you enjoyed it,” he says. “And the whisky-flavored lube tasted surprisingly good,” he adds.

Hannibal laughs, sitting on the bed next to him. “Maybe I should give it a try as well,” he says, reinforcing his meaning by sliding his fingers between Will’s asscheeks to reach his wet cunt.

He immediately spreads his legs, bringing a smile to Hannibal’s face. He wanted to put the condoms he bought to use, but that can wait. He won’t be able to get hard for a while, he’s not a young man anymore, so pleasuring Will with his mouth in the meanwhile is the best way to pass time.

“Turn around, my love,” Hannibal says, kissing the small of his back. “Let me return the favor.”

“Hannibal,” Will whispers. He’s exhausted after their intense round of lovemaking, but he doesn’t want to go to sleep without telling him this.

“Yes, darling?”

“If something goes wrong…”

“It won’t go wrong,” Hannibal interrupts.

“Indulge me for a moment,” Will tiredly says. “If something goes wrong, I want you to know that I’m willing to do whatever it takes to keep us safe,” he blurts out. “Appearances, the FBI, and everyone else be damned, I’m not willing to give you up, to give us up. I can’t imagine a future without you in it.”

He nervously looks up to see Hannibal’s reaction and realizes he had nothing to be nervous about. The man is looking at him with such adoration that the mere sight of it makes Will want to hide from its intensity.

“ *Amore mio* , I feel the same way,” he says, stroking Will’s hair. “There are not enough words in the English language to describe how beautiful you are, not only your appearance but your wonderful brain, and that imagination and darkness that you fear so much yet are irresistibly attracted to. You never cease to amaze me.” He grabs his hand to give a kiss on his knuckles. “I’ll kill anyone that dares stand in our way, *mon cher* .”

“Me too,” Will whispers.

They kiss, and it feels like none of the other kisses they had shared in the past. It’s more intimate. It tastes like a promise on their tongues, and Will has never felt so loved by anyone before.

Will’s alarm goes off at 7 am the next morning and he groans. He is the one that set it and yet he curses at himself for doing so. Still, getting up from bed is a crucial part of the plan, so he really has to.

He sighs and reaches for the phone on his bedside table to turn it off, without opening his eyes. Once it’s off, he feels tempted to sleep again, but Hannibal kisses him to keep him awake.

“Good morning, Will,” he murmurs between kisses. “I’ll make us breakfast.”

Will hums non-committally but he finally opens his eyes, rubbing them with his hands. He stays a few seconds staring at the ceiling, mind blank, before finally getting up. He puts on a clean t-shirt and a pair of sweatpants before walking down the hall. He opens the door of Beth’s room as silently as he can to call for Ellie, who tends to sleep with her, before walking down the stairs.

He greets the rest of the dogs downstairs, all patiently waiting for Hannibal to throw a piece of sausage in their direction, or most likely hoping for the whole pan to magically teleport to the floor. Will stares at Hannibal as he moves through the kitchen, looking as comfortable here as he does in his own house. He appreciates the sight of his flexing muscles, only wearing his pajama pants.

Will checks the time on the clock and calls the dogs to follow him. He opens the front door just a tiny bit at first to take a peek outside before opening it fully to let the dogs out once he sees that Mrs. Scott is taking her own small dog for a morning walk, at the same time as she always does. The woman smiles and waves at him when she notices him, and Will waves back, faking a yawn.

Some of the dogs approach her to ask for pets and play with her dog. Will smiles at them and goes back inside, trusting the pack to behave themselves.

“That’s the last part of our alibi done,” Will tells Hannibal once he is inside again.

“Good job, my love,” Hannibal says, handing him a cup of coffee.

“Let’s hope it is enough to deceive the FBI,” Will sighs. He sits down on the sofa at Hannibal’s side.

“It will be,” he replies while looking at his phone screen.

“Has Freddie Lounds posted the article yet?” Wil asks.

“That’s what I was checking, not yet. She might still be sleeping.”

“At least it gives us some extra time before Jack comes knocking at the door.” Will sighs, leaning back on the sofa.

They hear the steps of someone coming down the stairs, then walking into the kitchen.

“Good morning, Will, Hannibal,” Elijah greets them, entering the living room, holding a cup of coffee. Will makes space for him to sit. “How did last night go?”

“Good, I didn’t have any problems with the theater's security,” Will replies.

Elijah smiles. “Great,” he says, then adds in a more serious tone, “I hope it all works out well.”

“Me too,” Will agrees. He squeezes Elijah’s thigh affectionately.

“Is there anything specific you want us to tell the FBI or police if they come asking any questions while you’re gone?” Elijah asks.

“Tell them the truth: we spent the whole day in the house, then Hannibal went to buy something at the store and came back to stay the night,” Will says.

“You might add some detail if they’re not satisfied, as long as it is believable: maybe you heard one of us walking in the room, or walking down the hall to go to the bathroom, something along those lines,” Hannibal adds.

Just then, Elijah’s phone chimes. He checks the screen and smiles, passing the phone to Will. “Freddie Lounds posted.”

“You have notifications on for TattleCrime?” Will frowns.

Elijah shrugs. “I’ll turn them off after you read the article.”

Will reads it out loud. It mentions the pictures of the crime scene being sent as an anonymous tip, and she describes in great detail how the body was killed. Of course, the central aspect of the note is, like they hoped for, based on the very clear message the perpetrator of this crime is sending in response to the one he received from the man that displayed Nick Boyle’s body.

It isn’t long until Will’s phone rings and Jack’s name shows up on the screen. And so the third stage of their plan begins.

Will will be at work probably the whole day, so he reminds Hannibal to be careful before leaving since they aren’t sure when their man is going to answer their message, or how. Will spends the day entertaining the FBI, throwing them off their trail as much as he can.

“I hate to ask you this, Will, but you know I have to be thorough,” Jack tells him at some point in the day. “Where were you last night?”

“At home,” Will replies. “Hannibal stayed the night.”

Jack swallows. Will knows he wants to ask about their relationship at some point but isn’t sure how to bring it up without adding fuel to the fire.

“And neither of you left, at any point?”

“No,” Will replies, purposefully sounding offended. “You can ask the kids, or my neighbors if you don’t believe me.”

“No, no, I believe you,” Jack says. “I sincerely hope I’m not misplacing my trust in you, Will.”

“Look, Jack, this isn’t my job, I do this because I want to help, to stop people from dying. I don’t-” There’s a knock on the door.

“Jack, so sorry for the interruption,” Brian says. “We called the clinic, Abigail Hobbs didn’t leave at all yesterday.”

“You’re investigating Abigail as well? Seriously?” Will complains.

“Will, we found records of purchases of two train tickets on each place a girl disappeared during the Shrike case.” He raises a hand to stop Will before he can speak again. “Yes, I know you told me we would and that the person traveling with him was the one that killed Nick Boyle. We were just making sure Abigail wasn’t the person he was trying to contact.”

Will sighs. “I’m sorry, Jack, I just- I want all of this to be over,” he says. “I look at my kids and imagine what stress they might experience if they were in Abigail’s position right now and…” He

sighs again.

Jack squeezes his arm. “I know, Will, I know. We’ll figure out who these two people are, don’t worry.”

Will gives him an insincere small smile and a nod. Jack smiles back, similarly fake.

After that shitshow, around 5 pm, Will leaves Quantico. Despite what Jack told him, Will notices an FBI agent following him as soon as he begins to drive. It’s not surprising, honestly, if he were in Jack’s position he would be suspicious of Hanibal and him as well. He’s glad they planned their alibis ahead of time.

When he arrives home, he lets the dogs out and spends the rest of the evening inside, trying to ignore the constant feeling of someone watching him from the windows to not raise unnecessary suspicions.

At around 7:30 pm Hannibal arrives at his home in Baltimore after work and he pauses as soon as he opens the front door. There’s someone in his house, and their scent is one he recognizes.

The smell of the cheap, masculine cologne almost manages to cover the scent of cleaning products and hospital rooms, but Hannibal’s sensitive nose still catches it. He goes mentally over a list of medical practitioners he’s met over the years while moving to the kitchen, trying to not alert the intruder he knows is waiting for him in the dining room.

He pretends to start preparing dinner, opening the fridge and taking a piece of meat from inside to leave on a cutting board on the counter. He grabs a knife to set next to it then turns around to put water inside of a pot and smiles when the scent gets nearer behind him. He turns around.

“Good evening, Matthew,” he greets him calmly. “It’s rude to walk into someone's home when they’re absent.”

“Well, I would apologize for it, Doctor Lecter,” Matthew Brown says. “But I think you’re in no position to tell me what is or isn't rude. Keeping secrets from the people you love is very rude, after all.”

“I’m sorry but I don’t quite catch your meaning,” Hannibal says.

“Oh, come on, drop the act.” Matthew rolls his eyes. “You know very well what I’m talking about, otherwise I wouldn’t be here. I received your message.”

“Okay, I’ll drop the act,” Hannibal says. He leaves the pot on the counter. “Why did you display Nicholas Boyle’s body? Why now? If you knew about it, you had plenty of opportunity to do so sooner, or report it to the authorities. Why didn’t you?”

“Simple matter of time and logistics. A nurse's schedule is pretty tight, you know?” he says. “And then my dear William got admitted in that hospital and I got to take care of him—” his face becomes something dark now, dangerous, “—and see how bad of a fit you were for him.”

Will was wrong. There was no one stalking Hannibal. Matthew Brown was stalking him. Hannibal’s blood boils.

“His kills are a work of art, he always has a message to give, innocents to defend, but you?” Matthew laughs bitterly, disgusted. “You are a vile thing, pretending to love him just to—what? Take advantage of his position in the FBI? Try to stir him from his path, make him a monster like you are?”

“I do love Will,” Hannibal says.

He silently freaks out when he realizes this is the first time he’s said those words out loud. Love. He loves Will. He never thought he’ll ever love anyone again after what happened with Mischa, and yet here he is. He almost feels like crying at the realization, but represses it as it’s really not the right time for it.

“Love him? Ha! Please.” Matthew crosses his arms in front of his chest. “You might have him fooled, but you can’t fool me,” he says. “I love him! I understand him! And I know he’d understand me when the moment comes. He’ll forgive me when he realizes what you are.”

“Forgive you?” Hannibal asks, preparing to jump into action if necessary.

“You don’t think I’ve come here just to talk, do you?”

“I don’t think so, no.”

“Then you must know the real reason I’m here.” He moves his hand to his hip, brushing his fingers with the pocket in which his gun is hidden.

“You came to kill me,” Hannibal tells him matter-of-factly.

“Nothing can’t stand between Will and me,” Matthew declares.

He reaches for his gun, and Hannibal quickly dodges, reaching for the knife.

“Easy, now, Doctor,” Matthew says. “I don’t plan to kill you here, it would be a waste not to display you.”

Hannibal and he dance around the counter, Hannibal with knife in hand while Matthew points at him. He’s waiting for the perfect moment to escape the kitchen and run for the bathroom, where he keeps an emergency syringe filled with sedatives for situations like this one.

“This will be a lot easier if you just come with me, Doctor Lecter,” Matthew tells him.

“If you’re aware of who I am, you can’t possibly think I’ll go with you without putting up a fight,” Hannibal replies.

He rapidly pushes one of the breakfast stools in his direction to distract him, then runs off toward the bathroom. He pushes the sofa chair that’s next to the door on the way there, to further delay Matthew. Hannibal knows he’s not going to shoot him, not when he needs to make a display out of him, and intends to make him suffer. A bullet wound would damage the entire process.

He manages to reach the bathroom on time and search for the hidden box in the medicine cabinet space behind the mirror. He opens it, careful not to sting himself, and grabs one of the syringes. Matthew arrives and Hannibal doesn’t hesitate to jump him, grabbing him firmly to inject the syringe right into his neck with practiced accuracy.

Matthew struggles, landing a few kicks and punches on Hannibal but nothing truly hurtful until he stops moving completely and drops to the ground. Hannibal rubs his hands as if to clean them, then straightens his clothes.

He has to call Will.

Matthew wakes up for a brief moment after that and is greeted by the familiar faces of both Hannibal Lecter and Will Graham. He's still feeling hazy, but he can hear fragments of conversation, even if he can't fully process its meaning.

"Did you really think I didn't know who Hannibal truly was?" Will says. He's not using his usual tone of voice, the sweet thing Matthew is used to hearing. He sounds angry, consumed by pure dark venom. "I'm perfectly aware of Hannibal's hobbies. And you thought yourself superior to him? Thought you could kill him to save me, comfort me and become my partner? Please." He laughs, cruel, almost disgusted. "You're nothing like him. So beneath him that you don't even deserve to be called human."

Hannibal, at his side, simply observes, with a big smile on his lips and pride gleaming in his eyes.

"You're nothing more than a pig, Matthew," Will tells him cruelly. "And you know what the Chesapeake Ripper does to pigs, don't you?"

"Sleep now, Matthew," Hannibal says, once more injecting something into his neck. "We have great plans for you."

Matthew is at his own house when he regains his conscience again. Lying on his bed, to be specific. There's light filtering through the blinds, and he blinks in confusion. Was all of that just a particularly vivid dream? He doesn't think so. Then what the hell is happening? Why is he still alive?

He gets up and the first thing he realizes is that he's wearing the same clothes he wore to Hannibal's house, only that now they're covered in dark, red blood. He frowns, now even more lost than before. He gazes at the floor and sees a trail of blood stains there, staining the white carpet of his bedroom floor, and disappearing behind the closed door.

He opens it to get to the hallway and then follows the trail to the living area, where he finds a bigger pool of blood on the floor and the body of a young woman with brown hair and blue eyes dead on the coffee table, naked and with cuts all over her torso. He jumps in surprise, pulse quickening.

No. No, no, no, no, no.

He runs to the kitchen to grab the phone, but he finds another surprise on his counter. There's a cutting board, also stained red with blood, and on top of it rests what he knows is a human kidney.

No.

If he calls the police now, they'll have enough evidence to convict him of something he didn't do.

Shit, shit, shit.

Of course. That's what Hannibal referred to when he said they had great plans for him.

They weren't trying to kill him. They planned to frame him.

Fuck. He has to flee. Leave the state, the country if possible, as fast as he can.

He runs back to his bedroom to pack a bag and grab all of the cash he has.

The doorbell rings.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

God, I can't believe this is the final chapter.

I hope everyone enjoys it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will wakes up to loud noises coming from the lower floor of the house. He checks the clock and sighs when he sees he's only slept for around three hours. He's going to need coffee, but he doubts the agents downstairs are going to let him drink one before taking him to the bureau. Still, he takes his time getting up and dressing up. He washes his face and combs his hair with his hands to not look so disheveled.

"Dad." Beth knocks on his door. "There are FBI agents here, Elijah let them in," she says.

Will opens the door. Beth is still wearing her pajamas, carrying a sleepy Ellie in her arms, looking as scared as you would expect a kid to be when the authorities come knocking at their house asking for their dad, but she winks at him and gives him a small nod.

"Alright, sweetheart, go back to your room, I'll speak with them," Will tells her, making sure that the agent looming on the stairs hears him. "Everything will be okay."

Beth nods and disappears down the hallway, petting Ellie. Will exits his room and heads downstairs. There, he finds a group of four agents and Jack Crawford standing in different parts of his living room and kitchen, some looking around, searching for clues. He's surprised that the forensic team, or at least Beverly, Jimmy, and Brian are not there as well. Jack is clever. He knows Will's friends would never research his house without reasonable claims.

"Good morning, Jack," Will says, trying not to sound too calm. The man is standing by the door, Elijah by his side, scratching Winston's head. "What is going on?" he asks, frowning.

"Where were you last night?" Jack asks him, coldly, not returning his greeting.

"Are you seriously asking me this again, Jack? This is becoming repetitive." Will rolls his eyes, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Just answer the question, Will."

"I was here," he says. "We ordered pizza with the kids, had dinner, spoke with Hannibal over the phone, then went to bed around nine."

"Is there anyone that can confirm this? Other than the kids and Hannibal."

"I don't think so," Will says, frustrated. "What is going on, Jack?"

“I’m afraid you’ll have to come with me to the bureau,” Jack says. “We assigned an agent to follow you yesterday, and no one has heard of her whereabouts since. She was supposed to call at midnight, but she never did.”

“You sent someone to follow me?”

“We had to make sure you had nothing to do with what happened, Will. You’re too close to Abigail Hobbs,” Jack says.

“And now the agent disappeared,” Will says, nodding. “I can see why that’d look bad.”

“This’ll be a lot easier if you come with us voluntarily. Cuff him.” He indicates to a nearby agent, who moves to obey him.

“Mr. Crawford, Will was here all night, I swear, he never left, you can’t take him away, he—” Elijah tries to defend him.

“It’s okay, Elijah, don’t worry,” Will shakes his head, letting the agent do his job. “I’ll be back soon.”

Just then, Jack’s cell phone rings.

“Agent Crawford,” he answers.

He stays quiet for a few minutes, listening to what the person on the other side of the line is telling him, expression growing more bewildered with each word he hears. He sighs and hangs up.

“They found her, she’s dead,” he says, rubbing his face. “Take him away.”

“Dad! What—!?” comes Beth’s voice from inside the house as Will is escorted to a car.

Will is not surprised when they lock him in an interrogation room, without his phone. He asks for a cup of coffee but a glass of water is all he gets. He sighs and rests his head on the table, waiting for Jack or some other agent to come question him.

He isn’t surprised either when the door opens again, this time to lead a cuffed Hannibal inside as well. Everything is still smooth sailing, going according to plan, but of course, he can’t let the FBI know that.

“Hannibal?” he fakes his astonishment. “Why are you here as well? What the hell?”

“Hi, Will, I also don’t know why I’m here,” he says as the agent uncuffs him and the door closes behind them. Will works at the bureau, so he’s well aware that there are microphones and cameras hidden inside the room, so they need to keep up the act. “FBI agents knocked on my door and said I had to come with them because I was suspected of murder. They didn’t tell me much else.”

“Apparently, there was an FBI agent assigned to follow me, and she was found dead this morning,” Will says. “I understand them suspecting me, but you? What do you have to do with it? You didn’t sleep over at my house”

“I don’t know, my love.” Hannibal interlocks their fingers, stroking circles over Will’s knuckles. “After our call last night, I headed to bed. I had work today, but I’m afraid that’s been canceled. I didn’t even get an opportunity to call to warn my patients about it.”

“I’m sorry you’ve been dragged into this mess because of me,” Will tells him.

“It’s not your fault,” Hannibal says. “I’m curious as to why I’ve been dragged into this myself. Do they think I killed the agent?” he adds with a frown.

“Did you?” Will asks, teasingly raising an eyebrow.

“It hadn’t occurred to me, no,” Hannibal replies, equally teasing.

Jack chooses that moment to walk in. “Gentlemen, sorry to keep you waiting,” he says. He sits down on the chair on the other side of the table.

“Jack, are Elijah and Beth okay?” is the first thing Will asks. He isn’t sure what time it is and doesn’t know if they’re at school or still at home.

“They’re fine, Will, don’t worry about them,” Jack tells him, setting a folder on the table and flipping it open. “We brought them here. They’re in my office.”

Will nods, satisfied with the answer.

“May I ask why we were brought here?” Hannibal asks.

“Look, I’ll make this simple,” Jack says, leaning closer to them. “Sophia Black, the agent we sent to keep an eye on Will yesterday, disappeared around 10 pm last night and was found dead earlier this morning in Matthew Brown’s house.” He pauses, gauging their reactions. “Does that name ring any bells?”

“He was one of the nurses that took care of Will during his hospital stay,” Hannibal says.

“Ah, that guy, yes, I always found him a bit strange,” Will nods. “He killed the agent? Why?”

“That’s the thing,” Jack says. “You see, Mr. Brown is convinced that you’re the ones that killed her, then leave her body in his home to frame him.”

Will chuckles. “Come on, Jack, don’t tell me that you believe him,” he says. “I don’t even know where he lives, I didn’t even notice someone was following me yesterday. Matthew Brown is lying to you. What else did he tell you?”

“I’m not accusing you of anything, just making sure, following procedure,” Jack clarifies, before starting his tale. “He confessed to displaying Nicholas Boyle’s body, though he said he didn’t kill him. He accused you, doctor,” he tells Hannibal.

“That explains why I’m here,” Hannibal says calmly. Jack nods.

“That’s bullshit,” Will says at the same time.

“Let me finish,” Jack warns. “According to Brown, the death of Farah Ayad was a message response from Hannibal, so he went looking for him at his house, then was drugged, and woke up with Sophia Black’s dead body in his house and her blood on his clothes.”

“He had her blood on his clothes?” Will asks. “Jack, you can’t be serious about it. He killed her and came up with an excuse for it when you found out.”

“I know he’s most likely lying,” Jack says. “What I don’t understand is why he seems to be so sure that Doctor Lecter is Nicholas Boyle and Farah Ayad’s killer, and even more. He accused him of being the Chesapeake Ripper.”

“This is ridiculous,” Will complains with bitter laughter.

“I’ve met Matthew a couple of times while I was still working at the hospital, then a few times while attending my own appointments there, but we never exchanged more than a couple of words. Even when Will was admitted, we didn’t speak much,” Hannibal explains.

“You know what he’s saying is bullshit, Jack.”

“But why accuse Hannibal? It’s a pretty random choice if what you’re saying is true, doctor.”

Will frowns and tilts his head, pretending to have an epiphany.

“Wait,” he says. “Jack, do you have a picture of the crime scene?”

Jack searches inside the folder and then hands Will a pile of photographs consisting of different angles of Matthew Brown’s apartment. He shuffles through them, putting on his best “oh, I’ve never seen this place nor the dead agent before” face.

Will gasps softly when he finds the picture he was looking for: a close-up of Sophia’s body.

“Jack,” Will says resolutely. “She fits the profile.”

“What profile?” Jack frowns, confused.

“Garret Jacob Hobbs’ victim's profile,” Will explains. “Black hair, blue eyes, wind-chafed skin, similar height…” he starts, seeing in Jack’s eyes the exact moment he understands what he is trying to say. “Matthew Brown is Garret Jacob Hobbs’ helper, the one we’ve been trying to find.”

“What about the age?” Jack asks as Will predicted he would.

“That’s an inconsistency, yes,” Will admits and frowns. “He killed her, knowing that I’ll be accused of doing so instead of him,” he thinks out loud, then shakes his head. “That doesn’t make sense. He came looking for me?”

“Why would he come looking for you if he thinks Hannibal is the one behind Farah Ayad’s murder?” Jack asks. “Why would he think you have something to do with all of this?”

Will opens his mouth as if to speak, then closes it, eyes widening. “Oh my God.”

“What? What is it?”

“He didn’t come to my house to kill the agent,” Will declares. “He came thinking Hannibal would be there. He’s the stalker.”

“The stalker?”

“A few weeks ago, I felt like someone was following me. The sensation would come and go, I remember mentioning it to Beverly, but a little paranoia comes with the job so we didn’t think much about it, and we had been drinking that day, uh, it was during our team’s Christmas presents’ exchange. Later when I was diagnosed with encephalitis and admitted to the hospital the sensation disappeared, so I thought it was just another sign of the illness, my brain messing with me,” Will explains.

“If Matthew Brown was stalking you and saw me as a possible threat, he would’ve gone to alert you of said threat,” Hannibal says, following Will’s line of thought. “Many intimacy-seeking stalkers carry the delusion that their love is reciprocated. In his deluded state, incapable of seeing Will dating someone else, might’ve come up with the idea that I must be a bad person, someone Will needed protection against, thus came looking to kill me. Since he didn’t find me there but found someone else, an agent, a threat, he killed her instead,” he continues. “Judging by her body’s state in the picture, he took out his anger on the poor woman.”

“But why accuse the both of you, then? Not just Hannibal?” Jack questions, but Will can see on his face that he believes what Hannibal is telling him.

“I don’t know,” Hannibal shakes his head. “I don’t know why he’ll accuse us of the murder of Nick Boyle or Farah Ayad, either.”

“I’m sure he’s Nicholas Boyle’s killer, Jack,” Will says. “If he followed me all the way to Minnesota, he must have witnessed him attacking us at the house and gotten angry…no, he must have been in Minnesota before us, waiting for us, for Abigail. He might have tasked Nick Boyle to kill her, then gotten angry when he didn’t. He wanted to kill the golden ticket, the one person his friend didn’t manage to kill. Finish what they started.”

Okay, Will got a bit carried away with his tale since they hadn’t planned to involve Abigail, but when the idea came into his mind he took it. It’ll be good for her own case to dispel the remaining doubts about her being involved in her father’s crimes and being Nick Boyle’s killer. From Hannibal’s barely there smile Will could sense that he agreed.

Jack thinks about it for a moment, processing all the new information, then gets up.

“Alright. I’ll get the Agents Katz, Price, and Zeller to give me their statements about your sayings of the stalker, and get Doctor Bloom’s opinion on Brown’s statement and Doctor Lecter’s theory,” he says. “I’ll have to contact Abigail Hobbs again as well,” he adds, and Will doesn’t complain about it this time. “You’re free to go. Unless you want to help with the investigation, Will?” he says, almost hoping.

Will lets out a dry laugh. “No, Jack, I really don’t,” he says, getting up as well. “I don’t think I’ll help with investigations around here at all for some time,” he declares, then turns to Hannibal. “Let’s go.”

“Wait, Will,” he calls before he can leave, and the man turns around to look at him. “Can I say something to you? It’ll be quick.”

Will sighs and looks at Hannibal. “Go. I’ll be with you in a sec.”

Hannibal nods and walks away, leaving Jack and Will alone in the hallway outside of the interrogation room.

“So, um, you and Hannibal are together, together, huh?” he asks, clearly uncomfortable. Will’s curious what he has to say about it.

“We’re in a relationship, yes,” Will says, crossing his arms over his chest. “Why?”

“Nothing, I’m, uh, happy for you, Will,” he says with an awkward smile. “You look different, happier. He’s good for you.”

Will smiles. If only he knew. “I am happy, thank you,” he says. “Was that all? I really should be going.”

“Did you mean what you said earlier? About stopping to help the BAU?” Jack asks.

“Yes, Jack,” Will replies. “I’m tired, exhausted of it all. I need some time away from all the murder. As you said, I’m happy. Let me enjoy life a bit.”

Jack doesn’t bother him after that.

Beverly is the one that later calls to inform him of the advances of the investigation, the incriminating evidence they found, and that there’s no way Matthew is innocent. Will tries not to sound too happy about it, especially when the Gods smile in his favor and the computer lab team also finds a bunch of searches of Will’s name and incessant tattlecrime.com website visits on Matthew’s internet history that make Jack conclude that he became obsessed with Will after seeing him at the Hobbs’ residence in Minnesota.

By the end of the week, when they find the evidence that points to Matthew Brown also being the copycat that killed Cassie Boyle, and contact an ex-boyfriend of his that claims to have suffered from his stalking, and, even more, that he used to be an inmate inside the BSHCI, Will, and Hannibal has Jack knocking on their doors to profusely apologize. Hannibal says that everything is forgotten and invites him to dinner where he might have or might have not served him a piece of [AGENT].

After an eventful week, of Hannibal, working extra time to make up for the appointments with patients he missed, and of Will catching up with reading essays and preparing the upcoming exam, they finally see each other again for dinner at Hannibal’s house. It’s also Isabela’s birthday, so Elijah is sleeping over at her place. Beth eats dinner with them, then disappears to her assigned guest room to work on her science homework.

“There’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you since the other day, Will, but I didn’t have an opportunity,” Hannibal tells him while they do the dishes.

“What is it?” Will asks, grabbing the plate Hannibal is passing him and setting it on the dish drying rack.

“We’ve talked about you being able to kill without needing that person to be horrible, or to have done something you consider immoral when you killed dear Farah,” Hannibal begins. “Do you remember what you said?”

“I told you I was able to do it because it was to protect my family, our relationship,” Will replies.

“Yes, then you proceeded to kiss me to avoid exploring the subject any further,” Hannibal adds, amused. “Are you going to repeat that same excuse to me if I remind you that you took an innocent life, the life of an agent whose job is saving lives, without thinking it twice?” he asks. “Or are you finally able to admit that you enjoy killing just for the thrill of it and that justifying your intentions behind a deeper system of morals and justice was just a facade to protect yourself from that admission?”

Will remains silent for a couple of seconds. Hannibal patiently waits, the sound of the water running as their only company.

“I’ve always known I enjoy killing, the power it makes me feel,” Will confesses. “Killing bad people has always brought me a sense of comfort, like I’m actively doing something to transform the world into a better place, ridding it of the people that don’t deserve to inhabit it,” he continues. “I always resisted killing innocent people because, if I did, I would be no different than the people I hunt, hurting others for their own pleasure. That doesn’t mean I never wanted to, and that I’m capable of harming anyone if it means protecting the people I love.” He coughs, trying to divert Hannibal’s attention from the last words he said. “And yes, I’m not averse to killing someone with you, even if your reason to kill them doesn’t meet my own standards. I don’t care who you kill, or why you kill them. I can kill them with you, but I won’t just kill indiscriminately myself.”

“I would never ask that of you, my love,” Hannibal says, grabbing Will’s hand to kiss his knuckles. “I do have a proposition, however.”

Will chuckles, unsurprised. “What is it?” he asks. “Or should I say, who is it?

“You know me so well, dear boy,” Hannibal smiles. “You don’t have to assist me if you don’t wish to, but this entire week I’ve been thinking that Matthew Brown would have never found out who you are if it weren’t for Freddie Lounds,” he says, expression turning sour. “She put a target on your back. Endangered your life for a few more clicks on her website.”

“I’ve never liked her,” Will says. “She also intended to exploit Abigail by offering to write a book about her,” he remembers. “It’s not the first time killing her crosses my mind. We should wait, however.” He turns around, leaning against the counter. “With all that’s happened lately, and Matthew’s trial coming up, she’ll be writing a lot about us. We can’t risk someone connecting it to us, as tiny as the chance might be. Most people won’t notice, but Jack or Beverly might.”

“So we wait?”

“We wait until enough time has passed, or she begins writing about some other killer that’s got her eye,” Will confirms.

“And then we kill her.”

“Yes,” Will nods. “I can’t wait to see what kind of dish you’ll prepare,” he says with a smile.

Hannibal kisses him.

A few months later…

The house is filled with people, reunited to celebrate the occasion. Hannibal is in the kitchen, of course, taking care of preparing dinner with the assistants he hired, so Will is left to greet the guests and entertain them while they wait for the food to be served. Usually, he would be grumpy and anxious at having to do all the talking and socializing without Hannibal's comforting presence at his side, but the circumstances make it impossible for him to stop smiling. Furthermore, Beth is with him and she is a very talkative kid with a love for being the center of attention, and not afraid of performing a piano piece for friends, relatives, and strangers alike.

The new house is spacious, but in no way as big as Hannibal's previous residence was. It compensates by having a big garden for the dogs to run freely around in, a two-story basement for their particular hobbies, and a shed for Will to keep his motors and trinkets in. The living room is the most spacious room in the house, currently decorated with silly banners and balloons, courtesy of the work of Beverly and Jimmy. There's even a gigantic photograph of Hannibal and Will pasted to one of the walls, and Will is wishing one of the dogs decides to rip it out. If this is what they made for their engagement party, Will dreads finding out what they have planned for his bachelor party.

"Who would have thought that eternal bachelor Dr. Lecter would settle down any time soon," Mrs. Komeda tells him, bringing him out of his thoughts.

Will smiles at her and drinks a sip of his champagne. They're standing close to the door, watching as Beth's hands caress the piano tiles and fill the room with music.

"I'm truly happy that the person he chose to marry is you, Will," she tells her, then gets closer to him to whisper: "Between me and you, none of his previous partners was a good match for him."

"Really?" he asks with a look of complicity.

"Really," she confirms, grabbing his arm for emphasis.

"And I am?" Will asks.

"Oh, of course you are, dear," she exclaims as if it were blasphemy to claim otherwise.

"You match his wit, son," her husband says. "He needs someone intellectual, like you, at his side. Otherwise, he'd get bored."

"I hope I can stay interesting for a long time, then," Will says.

"Oh, you will, dear, you have nothing to worry about," Mrs. Komeda gives him a pat on the arm before letting go.

"Will," Abigail calls him with a smile, walking in his direction.

She's wearing a blue dress Hannibal bought for her and a pearl necklace covers her scar, which she hides less and less these days. Once Matthew's trial was over and he was found guilty, Abigail was

discharged from the psychiatric hospital a few days after. Hannibal and Will were already in the process of looking for a new house to move in together, and they didn't hesitate to offer her a place to stay in the spare room, at least until she decided what she wanted to do with her future. She accepted between grateful tears and hugs.

If Hannibal and Will threatened a particular journalist to write a redeeming article about Abigail before she went missing, there is no proof. And there won't be, considering what Hannibal is serving for dinner. The thought makes Will smile.

"What is it?" he asks her.

"Hannibal says the food will be ready soon," Abigail explains.

"Okay, thank you."

Abigail nods and disappears back to the kitchen to help. Elijah is nowhere to be found, so he's most likely in there as well.

Will walks in Beth's direction, who's still playing the piano on the other side of the room.

"You have a very talented daughter, Mr. Graham," Bella says when she sees him. She's standing close to the girl, sipping on a glass of champagne. Her husband is not with her, busy socializing with a few of Hannibal's colleagues.

"That I do," Will smiles as the blonde girl plays. She has the same bad habit of sticking her tongue slightly out when she focuses on something as he does.

He walks closer to her and places a hand on her shoulder to not startle her before leaning forward to whisper in her ear. Beth listens to him and nods, giving a proper ending to her song before getting up and standing on the piano bench.

"Attention please!" she shouts pretty loudly. Everyone stops what they're doing and turns to look at her. "Dad says the food will be ready soon and we should all take our seats at the table."

The table is, in reality, formed by the union of three different tables with a big, long tablecloth. Previous to meeting Hannibal, Will had no idea tablecloths as long existed. There's also an extra, smaller round table to serve as a kids' table, separate from the main one. Everyone's name is placed on top of the plates in small signs, handwritten by Elijah and Isabela. Will and Hannibal's places are set, of course, next to each other at the head of the main table.

The kitchen staff begins bringing the plates, led by Hannibal, and everyone bursts into applause. Will can't fight back the fond smile when his future husband makes eye contact with him, both of them sharing a complicity and understanding that the guests ignore. He takes his place next to Will but doesn't sit down yet. He grabs his glass of wine and waits for the staff to leave the room and the applause to stop before speaking.

"Thank you everyone for joining Will and me on this special occasion," he says. "Not only are we celebrating our engagement, but this is also the first gathering we host in our new home, and we hope it'll be the first one of many." He makes a pause, taking in the smiling faces looking at him. "I hope you were all able to enjoy the brief music concert by our dear Beth while waiting." The young girl smiles and giggles from the kids' table. Will winks at her.

“Now, the courses you’re about to enjoy couldn’t have been prepared without the assistance of Abigail and Elijah in the kitchen and, more importantly,” he says, “without the existence of Will Graham.”

His words take him by surprise and he smiles awkwardly, uncomfortable at suddenly being the center of attention. He can feel everyone’s eyes on him while Hannibal takes his hand to kiss his knuckles, paying special attention to his ring finger. Beverly’s loud whistle manages to make him and another handful of guests laugh, while others look at her with disapproval.

“He is, and will always be my muse,” Hannibal declares and, *God* , Will loves him so much his heart might burst. “Bon appetit,” he toasts.

The guests applaud once more and the couple sits down, smiling and with their fingers intertwined.

“I love you,” Will whispers.

“I love you too, *mylimasis* ,” Hannibal whispers back.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, thank you, thank you so so much for reading until the end. I appreciate every hit, every kudo, and every comment I get. It was a joy to write this story, and I'm truly happy that so many people enjoyed it and followed it till the end. Maybe I'll write some one-shot set in the same universe because I grew as fond of Elijah and Beth as some of you did.

I want to wish everyone a happy new year and I hope my Hannibal hyperfixation stays with me for a long, long time, because I have so many ideas to write these wonderful characters in.

If you liked the story, consider following me on my twitter or subscribing here to not miss any future fics.

To a wonderful 2023!

End Notes

Thank you for reading! Come scream at me on Twitter here

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!